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Perceptions of Mexican American At-Risk Students in the Completion and Non-Completion of School in Alternative Learning Environments

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Perceptions of Mexican American At-Risk Students in the Completion and Non-Completion of School in Alternative Learning Environments

by

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Dedication

To my wife, Holly, who has walked all this way with me and who has been a constant source of encouragement, and to our sons, Cuauhtemoc “Temo” and Thor Barrera, who are my inspirations. A special dedication to my parents, Inez and Angelita Rangel Barrera, who taught me the value of doing my best and to my Aunt, Mama Chalita, who believed in me and allowed me to grow by providing continual support throughout all my endeavors.

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Perceptions of Mexican American At-Risk Students in the Completion and Non-Completion of School in Alternative Learning Environments

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This dissertation evolved as a result of the expansion of alternative educational environments serving at-risk students – especially the disproportioned number of minority students. The study attempts to understand the perceptions of Mexican American at-risk students' experience in the completion or non-completion of a high school diploma in the alternative educational environment. The study found that non-completion participants had previously dropped out or were disconnected from the regular school before attending the alternative learning environment while completion participants had made the transfer without a break between the two educational environments. The study suggests that

the educational system separates students to the alternative learning environment in order to improve academic and behavioral performance but, because of the lack of physical and academic resources, unintentionally establishes low-expectations, creating a second class separate educational environment. The study further suggests that the intention to separate, support, and nurture has consequently evolved into a separate educational experience for at-risk students that fringes on past educational practices of separate but equal.

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Chapter One

Introduction

> "the hyphen…in the case of Mexican American…symbolizes…that short line used to both connect and disconnect the terms Mexican and American…[a connection education as well has not bridged]" (Carranza, 1978, p. 38)

The study of school dropouts has been one of the most focused areas in educational research (Beatty, Neisser, Trent, & Heubert, 2001). Although a basic high school education in our democratic society is a free opportunity for all tax payers, we also know, as with other citizen services, that some groups experience barriers. Such has been the Mexican American educational experience since the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on February 2, 1848 (Padilla 2000; Reyes, 2000). According to Litsinger (1973):

> "the failure to reach Mexican-American students involves unwillingness on the part of individuals within school systems to change teaching techniques, curriculum, or school organization to utilize what is known about Mexican-American students" (p. 3).

With the recent push for school reform, alternative schools, with their individual attention to student needs, have become more prevalent as an alternative to dropping out. In addition, they have been lauded as models in improving the performance of students who are in an at-risk situation. Consequently, because of alternative schools' early appearance of success in the 1960s, the number of students served has increased in alternative environments over the years - especially the number of minorities and students from low-socioeconomic status (Fenton-Dunn, 1998; McGee, 2001; Mottaz, 2002; Raywid, 1999; Reyes, 2000; Saunders & Saunders, 2002).

Although proponents of alternative education praise the progress these legal entities have made and acknowledge their contribution to student performance in the traditional educational setting, there is no strong research evidence of the measuring of positive academic performance enabling [Hispanic] students to finish secondary school with a high-quality academic program (Secada, 1999). Some studies have concluded that alternative schools are not much different from the traditional educational setting in structure or

practice, particularly in how they treat minority [Mexican American] students (Tice, 1994). Consequently, there is an uncertainty in the literature as well regarding the effectiveness of student engagement as well as safety in alternative programs (Davison-Aviles, Guerrero, Howarth, & Thomas, 1999; Dunbar, 2001; Fantini, 1974; Groth, 1998; Katsiyannis & Williams, 1998; Ruebel, Ruebel & O'Laughlin, 2002; Secada, 1999). It appears that the answers to these questions regarding alternative education might be dissected from former students' past-lived experience.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine the factors that contribute to Mexican American at-risk students' completion or non-completion of school in the alternative educational environment. Although the relationships between student, family, peers, and society contribute to dropping out behavior, the school has significant influence (Hess, 2000; Ronda & Valencia, 1994; Rumberger & Rodriguez, 2002; Valencia, 1997). It is specifically because of their program approach that alternative schools have an impact on four possible areas: 1) the student composition - social, 2) the school resources

– pupil/teacher ratio, 3) the school structure - size, and 4) the school's policies and practices (Raywid, 1994; Rumberger & Rodriguez, 2002).

This study is organized in the following manner: Chapter One presents the background information and a statement of the problem addressed in this study. The purpose of the study is explained. The research question that guided this study is provided. The design of the study provides information on the methodology that this study followed. The boundary of the study is defined within the scope of the study, and a list of terms is included for clarification. Chapter Two presents an examination of the relevant literature. Chapter Three describes the research method. Chapter Four covers the Narrative Report of Interview Transcripts and Findings. Chapter Five presents the Summary, Personal Reflections, Conclusions and Recommendations.

Background Information

Historically, schools were founded on an authoritarian model, promoted individual achievement, and supported

acculturation rather than on ethnic group identification, thus minimizing accommodation to individual differences in children (Hurtado & Garcia, 1994; Short, Short, & Blanton, 1994). Therefore, research that focuses on student deficiencies in terms of their personal and familial characteristics continues to be the most widely used method to explain student failure. Then, because educators look at the characteristics of minority students in identifying the causal factors of school failure, the intervention for school failure is typically limited to the characteristics of the students, generally leaving the institution and the social structure free from critical examination (Donmoyer & Kos, 1993; Valencia, 1997).

Therefore, from their inception, alternative schools were designed with the flexibility to adapt specifically at the school level in order to fulfill the unmet needs of traditional education. Alternative schools were conceived as a response to the public dissatisfaction with public schools as well as to the impact of societal change (Fenton-Dunn, 1998; Gregory, 2001; Groth, 1998; Katsiyannis & Williams, 1998; Nealy, 1994; Raywid, 1999; Reyes, 2000). These very

different schools first appeared in the private sector and eventually moved into the public learning environment with the concepts, theories, and ideas advanced by humanistic psychology (Fantini, 1974; Neumann, 1994).

It is not unusual, then, that with understanding of the varied conditions of families that exist in society, educators in alternative schools looked at positive steps to support and nurture students in this newly constructed learning environment in ways that differed from the traditional educational setting. Consequently, the design of alternative schools is more of a programmatic approach to institutional factors and processes that support and prevent students from dropping out. Alternative schools moved away from focusing on the individual as the problem to looking at the institution and the factors that influence dropping out behavior. Specifically, alternative schools have had an impact on four areas: 1) the student composition - social, 2) the school resources – pupil/teacher ratio, 3) the school structure - size, and 4) the school's policies and practices. In this way, alternative schools can make a difference in the completion of school for Mexican American

at-risk students (Raywid, 1994; Rumberger & Rodriguez, 2002).

Statement of the Problem

School professionals continue to respond to the crisis of school failure by looking to research to provide direction in order to design special programs that will inoculate students from perceived failing factors (Donmoyer & Kos, 1993; Howard, 1972). Most of the literature on at-risk students' school performance points to the student and his/her social and economic background as the causal factors – leaving the institution and the social structure free as possible causes (Valencia, 1997). Consequently, very little is known about the factors that mediate Mexican American at-risk students' academic success (Alva, 1995). Therefore, it is of utmost importance to examine the interaction between the Mexican American at-risk student's educational experience and the alternative educational environment.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to provide an in-depth description of the experiences of Mexican American at-risk students in the alternative learning environment. The study examined how Mexican American at-risk students perceive their experience in the completion or non-completion of school in the alternative educational environment. The primary purpose is to generate information that will be useful to educators as they seek to increase school completion rates of Mexican American at-risk students not only in the alternative learning environment but, most importantly, in the traditional educational setting where failure begins. The concept of contributing factors toward school completion or non-completion is explicated through the Mexican American at-risk student’s own words.

Research Question

This study sought to answer the following question: What are the factors that contribute to the successful completion or non-completion of school for Mexican American

at-risk students in the alternative educational environment as seen from the perspective of the students themselves?

Design of the Study

This study utilized a qualitative multiple-case design as defined by Yin (1989). The individual case studies focused on the alternative learning environment as well as the home context that contributed to the successful completion or non-completion of school by four individual Mexican American at-risk students. The researcher attempted to discover the behaviors, events, characteristics, attitudes, structure, and processes that occurred in the educational experience of the Mexican American at-risk students that had influence upon their successful completion or non-completion of school in the alternative educational environment (Marshall & Rossman, 1989).

Significance of the Study

Specifically, the study explored experiences of successful and non-successful school completion of Mexican American at-risk students in the alternative educational

environment. This study has contributed to the body of knowledge about Mexican American at-risk students' school completion. Historically, students' school performance has been connected to the student's social and economic background as the causal factors – leaving the institution and the social structure largely unexamined as possible causes (Valencia, 1997). This study provides insight into behaviors, events, characteristics, attitudes, structures, and processes, and strategies perceived by Mexican American at-risk students to be supportive in the success of school completion at the alternative educational level. Consequently, this study helps educators as well as policy makers improve academic services not only for Mexican American at-risk students in the alternative learning environment but, most importantly, for educators in the traditional educational setting where Mexican American at-risk student failure begins.

Definition of Terms

Alternative Environment: Any school (or administrative unit) within a system of differentiated schools or units that is

available on a choice basis. A public elementary/secondary school that addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, provides nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to a regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special education or vocational education (Lehr & Lange, 2003; Raywid, 2001).

At-Risk: A student who is academically at risk of school failure.

Hispanic: The term “Hispanic” is commonly used to refer to all of the various groups (Mexicans, Mexican Americans, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Central and South Americans, and others) that make up the Hispanic population.

Mexican American: A citizen of the United States whose family ancestry originated in Mexico.

School Completion: Completion of a high school diploma coursework – not a GED.

Non-Completion of School - Drop Out: The failure to complete high school diploma coursework.

Scope of the Study

This study examined the factors that contribute to the completion or non-completion of school of four Mexican American male at-risk students attending two different alternative educational learning environments in the state of Texas.

Summary

Hispanics (as long as I have lived) have led and continue to lead the nation in student dropouts. Among Hispanics the subgroup with the highest percentage (the one to which I belong) is the Mexican American (Bernal, Saenz, & Kinght, 1995; Hess, 2000; Rumberger & Rodriguez, 2002). It is a legacy of discrimination bequeathed by earlier empires – a legacy that continues today (Menchaca, 1999). This unrelenting educational disposition of Hispanics, and, in particular, Mexican Americans, is critical because according to Valencia (2002) “the Mexican American people…account for about six of every ten Latinos in the U.S.” (p. 55). This steady pattern in the increasing population of Hispanics has

negative economical implications for the entire country when the issue of dropouts is taken into consideration.

The study of former Mexican American at-risk students' past alternative educational environment lived experience provides valuable institutional information that contributes toward understanding their completion or non-completion of school. The use of a case study approach is appropriate for this study since qualitative research, according to Bogdan and Biklen (1982), contributes by "deriving universal statements of general social processes" (p. 41). Therefore, understanding the specific factors perceived by Mexican American at-risk students to influence school completion in the alternative learning environment has positive implications for educators in the traditional educational setting as well. Consequently, improving the educational status of Mexican Americans, according to Valencia (2002) "has tremendous positive implications for the good of the future of our nation" (p. 67).

Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

Introduction

> "research suggests that a complex myriad of factors lead to dropping out of school…the most visible and powerful single factor is SES[social economic status]" (Rumberger & Rodriguez, 2002).

Hispanic students in increasing numbers are attending public schools. However, Hispanic educational attainment is lower than their white peers', and the dropout percentage for this group, according to Davidson-Aviles, Guerrero, Howarth, & Thomas (1999), "has stayed the same since 1972, about 31%" (p. 2).

Consequently, the concern for Hispanic students' non-completion of school has been a continuous focus of educators (Beatty, et al., 2001). According to the 2000 census, Latinos account for 12.5% of the U.S. population or 35.3 million. However, it is predicted that by the year 2025 Latinos will represent 18% of the population (Driscoll, Briggs, Brindis, & Yankah, 2002). Given the growing numbers of Hispanics as a group and the increasing size of the

Hispanic youth population, the number of dropouts, especially for Mexican Americans within this larger Hispanic group, is serious. The dropout rate is not the same for all Hispanic/Latinos subgroups. According to Hess (2000), who cites Chapa and Valencia (1993), “Mexican Americans have nearly the highest number of dropouts” (p. 2).

Due to these high dropout rates, the limited acquired education will no doubt have an impact on each individual’s financial and social well-being well into adult life (Bernal, Saenz, & Knight, 1995; Hess, 2000). The concern, then, is not only the impact this large group of Hispanics will have socially and economically at the state and national level but, most importantly, at the personal level in the future of each individual.

Theories abound regarding student dropouts and the impact on society. Scholars have focused on possibilities from deficiency to structural theories as reasons for the inequality of educational performance among Hispanics (Barrera, 1979; Bernal, Saenz, & Knight, 1995). Still the interactions between individual and environment continue to be the most important factors contributing to student school

completion. According to Hess (2000), this interaction is between the student's attributes, the family, fellow peers, the school, and society.

Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to review the literature related to the Mexican American population within the larger Hispanic group and their interaction with the environment - the interaction as it relates to education with a specific focus on the alternative education setting. Understanding the process this past and present interaction with the environment has had and continues to play in the lives of Mexican Americans is important for educators serving this population. Consequently, it is of utmost importance to examine the following areas in order to get a better picture of what it means to be a Mexican American at-risk student: historical background of Mexican Americans, social class, research on Mexican American student failure, and the effectiveness of alternative education with Mexican American at-risk students.

History of Mexican Americans

> “Between Spaniards and [Mexican] Indians occurred every kind of human viciousness, barbarity, cruelty, even genocide.” (Moquin, p. 2, 1971).

The Mexican American in the United States is a *Mestizo* – a blend that originated in the fifteen hundreds between Mexico’s indigenous Indians and the conquistador’s Spanish blood from Spain (De Leon, 1982; Guadalupe, 1987; Vento, 1998; Vigil, 1980). Today the mixture of *Mestizo* with other ethnic groups other than Spaniards continues to produce a broad spectrum of unique *Mestizaje* features. There are Mexican Americans with characteristics such as color of eyes that range from dark black to light blue and skin complexion that varies from very light to very dark in tone. These features, especially the dark indigenous characteristics, are magnets for negative racial forces, and these forces have been imbedded in and can be traced to the indigenous lineage of the Mexican Americans and their historical roots (De Leon, 1982; Guadalupe, 1987; Menchaca, 1993; Griswold del Castillo, 1996; Takaki, 1979; Vento, 1998; Vigil, 1980).

The *Mestizo* roots were forged from the ruins of the Aztec conquest in 1521. According to Descola (1957), this Indian lineage began with the defeat of the Aztec Empire after a long siege and the subsequent invasion and destruction of the capital Tenochtitlan where “Every trace of Aztec presence there was effaced” (p. 221).

The conquest, according to Muldoon (1994), resulted in the destruction of most of the written materials and buildings of the Aztecs by the Catholic missionaries, thus “eliminating pagan religion [and temples] in Mexico” (p. 2). This cultural genocide caused intellectuals in Spain to question the conquest of the New World. Consequently, Spain undertook steps to justify the conquest of the Americas through the legal writings of Juan de Solorzano Pereira.

The focus, then as now, was racial and cultural superiority (Menchaca, 1999; Vento, 1998; Vigil, 1980) although, according to Barrera (1979), “racial [superiority] ideologies are a modern phenomenon and do not stretch back into ancient times, as is often claimed…[however, ethnocentrism is imbedded in and justified on]…cultural grounds, [and] often religious in nature” (p. 197). On this

foundation, Solorzano argued the legitimacy of the conquest as a just war, that “relations between Christian and non-Christian societies were likely to be warlike, not peaceful” (p. 13). In essence, Solorzano constructed, under papal religious power and “civilized” legal law, the argument giving Christians the right, as a moral responsibility, to eradicate such evil as they saw and claimed to plague American societies at that time.

The Catholic Church then allowed the Spanish conquistadors to take Mexican Indians as wives in order to procreate. But the *Mestizo* offspring from these unions were not received as equal by their peers; instead, the population was divided into the Peninsulares (born in Spain) and Criollos (born in Mexico) of two Spanish parents. This legally divided the ancient population into Indian, *Mestizo,* and Spaniards and accorded economic and social privileges to Spaniards based on the origins of the parents. The *Mestizos* enjoyed a higher social prestige than the Indians but were considered inferior to the Spaniards. Eventually these bounded social roles fermented the movement to liberate

Mexico from Spain (Campbell, R. C. 1995; Grebler, Moore, & Guzman, 1970; Menchaca, 1993).

This latter movement to liberate Mexico from Spain's colonial rule in the early 1800s, according to Menchaca (1993), resulted in the institution of the Spanish Constitution of Cadiz in 1812 in an attempt to avoid revolution by "abolish[ing] the *casta* system and the racial laws." During this time Mexico's neighbor to the North - the United States - "conferred full citizenship rights on 'free whites' only" (p. 586).

Consequently, at the end of the Spanish American War, the Southwest became a part of the United States with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on February 2, 1848. The "ideological and legal foundation for limiting the Mexican people's political rights…[in the United States had been established]." The *Mestizos'* indigenous connections to the Mexican Indian were used to "…undermine the civil rights language of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo" (p. 586). According to Samora and Simon (1977), Article IX in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo guaranteed the following:

Mexicans now established in territories previously belonging to Mexico, and which remain for the future within the limits of the United States, as defined by the present treaty, shall be free to continue where they now reside, or to remove at any time to the Mexican Republic, retaining the property which they posses wherever they please, without their being subjected, on this account, to any contribution, tax, or charge whatever.

Those who shall prefer to remain in the said territories may either retain the title and rights of Mexican citizens, or acquire those of citizens of the United States. But they shall be under the obligation to make their election within one year from the date of the exchange of ratifications of this treaty; and those who shall remain in the said territories after the expiration of that year, without having declared their intention to retain the character of Mexicans, shall be considered to have elected to become citizens of the United States.

> In the said territories, property of every kind, now belonging to Mexicans not established there, shall be inviolably respected. The present owners, the heirs of these, and all Mexicans who may hereafter acquire said property by contract shall enjoy with respect to it guarantees equally ample as if the same belonged to citizens of the United States. – Article VIII, Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. (p. 101)

With the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the Mexican *Mestizo* became the Mexican American (Acuna, 1988; Menchaca, 1999; Tate, 1969). Consequently, Mexican Americans became a minority not by immigrating or being brought to this country, but by being conquered (Sigman, 1983). This shifting of boundaries also changed the political, social, and educational interaction between the Mexican Americans and their environment. The treaty became an unfulfilled promise, according to Menchaca (1993), as ”Anglo-American legislators violated the treaty and refused to extend Mexicans full political rights” (p. 584). Consequently “Mexican Mestizos and Indians entered a new

racial caste-like order in which their civil rights were limited" (p. 587).

These limits were further extended, according to Menchaca (1993), through the 1883 *Robinson v. Memphis & Charleston Railroad Co.* case that legally excluded "racial minorities from hotels, restaurants, parks, public conveyances, and public amusement parks" (p. 596). In 1896 the Supreme Court through the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case "legalized all forms of social segregation, including school segregation" (p. 597). This decision gave the right to states "to determine who was white and who was nonwhite…and dark-complexioned Mexicans could be racially segregated" (p. 597). Consequently, according to Gonzales (1999), and Menchaca (1993) who cites Rangel and Alcala (1972), "In Texas by 1930, 90 percent of the schools teaching Mexican students were racially segregated" (p. 598).

Social Class

> "the social exercise of excluding 'Mexicans' and denying them the same opportunities and equality in American society stems from a white American self-preservation instinct

> prompted by the conquest of indigenous Mexican territory" (Orozco, p. 87, 1996).

Although Mexican Americans are represented in every class strata in the United States, it appears that the laws and policies imposed before and after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo followed and negatively continued to influence the Mexican American condition in their new environment. According to Griswold del Castillo (1996), "The citizenship rights…guaranteed in [the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo] Article VIII and IX…proved to be fragile…the Mexican Americans…became a disenfranchised, poverty-stricken minority" (p. 240).

This disenfranchised and poverty-stricken status continued to affect the lives of many Mexican Americans in their new constructed environment through employment and earned income. According to Meier and Ribera (1993), "During the first half of the twentieth century most Mexican Americans remained heavily concentrated in low-skill, low-pay rural and urban employment" (p. 251). These conditions continue to impact Mexican Americans to this day; for example, in 1997 thirty seven percent of Latino children

were living in families with income below the poverty level. Furthermore, thirty five percent of these families were headed by a house holder with no high school diploma. Consequently, this economic poverty appears to be a major contributing factor in the performance of the children of Mexican Americans in education. According to Rumberger and Rodriquez (2002), at least three-quarters of the difference in observed dropout rates between whites and Latinos and whites and Mexican Americans can be attributed to these differences in family background.

Over time, poverty has consistently continued to be the number one issue with the Hispanic population (Campbell, 1995). Rivera (1995), who cites Bronfenbrenner (1986), postures that “Income level determines, to a great extent, the [learning] experience of children” (p. 9). Because Mexican Americans tend to be poorer than non-Hispanic whites, their socioeconomic status puts many of the children at a disadvantage in the classroom due to the lack of educational-related materials in the home (Gonzalez, 2002).

The 2000 Bureau of the Census recently indicated that the median household income for Latinos was $30,700 compared

to $44,400 for whites – revealing the continued disproportioned gap in income for Hispanics. Campbell (1995) states, that consistent poverty predisposes the impact of other social conditions. People in lower class groups have higher morbidity and mortality rates of almost every disease or illness, and these differentials have not diminished over time (Syme & Berkman, 2001). As such, according to Stotts (1982), “Hispanics in this country…suffer from poorer health than that experienced by the rest of the population” (p. 12). Consequently, according to Zambrana, Dorrington, and Hayes-Bautista (1995), the health of Mexican Americans thus is affected by their living conditions, the community resources available to them to enhance their physical and mental functioning, and their social environment.

Research on Mexican American Student Failure

> “dropping out [of school] is significantly more prevalent among Hispanic…students” (Beatty et al., 2001, p. 14)

Children of Mexican American origin have not fared well in American educational institutions. Reasons abound that

attempt to explain why Mexican American children perform poorly in school. According to Valdes (1997), who cites Bond (1981), there are three main categories used to explain the poor academic achievement by Mexican American children: 1) The genetic argument, 2) The cultural argument, and 3) The class analysis argument.

The Genetic Argument

The genetic argument postures that certain groups are genetically more able than others and that academic talent is largely inherited. Although out of favor for a number of years, the genetic argument recently surfaced with Herrnstein and Murray in their 1994 book *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*. The main thesis of the book blames the poor for their own poverty. Herrnstein and Murray argue that blacks and Hispanics typically occupy lower positions in the occupational hierarchy because they are less intelligent. Consequently, the authors align their argument with genetic studies, using statistical data that purport that intelligence, which can

be measured using intelligence tests, is largely genetically and, indeed, ethnically determined.

According to Daniels, Devlin, and Roeder (1997), the many genes that potentially influence IQ are inherited, but IQ itself is not. IQ, the authors posture, develops as the child does. They further state, for example, that a child with good genes in a poor environment may grow up with a stunted IQ while a child with mediocre genes and a rich environment may thrive. Wahlsten (1997) reinforces the environmental contribution when he states that a very small change in environment, such as a dietary supplement, can lead to a major change in mental development. Supporting evidence comes from a variety of sources, including adoption studies across racial and class lines that have failed to separate the genetic from the social, long-term cohort effects on IQ, and diverse influences of schooling on mental abilities. Studies also indicate that intelligence requires persistent nurturing and is not fixed early in childhood (Valdes, 1997; Wahlsten, 1997).

The Cultural Argument

The cultural argument proponents believe children who perform poorly in school to be either culturally deprived or culturally different and therefore a mismatch with schools and school personnel. This argument, as opposed to the genetic argument, is currently still drawn upon by the research community and practitioners (Valdes, 1997; Valencia, 1997; 2002). According to Valdes (1997), who cites Lewis (1966), poor children are trapped in a culture of poverty and locked into a cycle of failure that is, in essence, self-perpetuating. Consequently, if children are to succeed, the children's deficiencies must be corrected, and the children must be taught to behave in more traditionally mainstream ways in specially designed intervention programs.

The image of a dysfunctional and negative culture of the poor has been challenged by a broad range of anthropologists as well as various social scientists (Foley, 1997; see also Anchor, 1978; Coles, 1967; Foley, et al., 1977; Hannerz, 1969; Howells, 1973; Rubin, 1976; Turkle, 1972; & Williams, 1981). These community studies

unequivocally refute the culture of poverty view of poor communities as socially disorganized and uninvolved in civic affairs.

Although the cultural argument has been well rebuked, economists, psychologists, and educators continue to apply these racist and classist theories against low-income and poor people – mostly minorities. Consequently, this behavior has substantially influenced the shaping and evolution of deficit thinking in educational thought and practices such that, in the 1990s, this argument reappeared as an explanatory basis for school failure by poor and working-class children, retooling the past construct of "disadvantaged student" to "at-risk" that affect many Mexican Americans students today (Foley, 1997; Pearl, 1997; Valencia, 1997).

The Class Analysis

The class analysis argument looks at school failure from the role of education in maintaining class difference, that is, in maintaining the power that exists between groups. Proponents of this view state that educational

institutions function to reproduce the structure of production and that schools serve as a sorting mechanism rather than as true avenues for movement between classes. According to Valdes (1997), who cites Giroux (1983), there are three different models of reproduction. These are the economic-reproductive, the cultural reproductive, and the hegemonic-state reproductive model which are explained in the following statement.

> The economic-reproductive model focuses on the relations between the economy and schooling and argues that schools reproduce labor skills as well as relations of production. The cultural reproductive model, on the other hand, attempts to link culture, class, and domination and argues that culture is itself the medium through which the ruling class maintains its position in society. Schools validate the culture of ruling class and at the same time fail to legitimize the forms of knowledge brought to school by groups not in power. Finally, the hegemonic-state reproductive model focuses on the role of the state in

organizing the reproductive functions of educational institutions. (p. 248)

Research on the causes of school failure of Mexican American at-risk students has been carried out typically following the principal trends of non-mainstream populations in general. Most of the available information groups Mexican Americans with all other Hispanic populations and thus makes disaggregation difficult (Pearl, 2002). The research in particular falls within the cultural deficit view which attempts to explain school failure by focusing on differences brought to school by the students themselves. Consequently, this research leaves the institution and the social structure largely unexamined as possible causes (Valencia, 1997).

Effectiveness of Alternative Schools

> "After years of aversive conditioning, cultural disintegration and deprivation, many [Mexican American] youngsters actually believe they are, in fact, inferior and develop the attitudes of non-achievers too" (Orozco, p. 21, 1996)

The three explanations of school failure are embedded in every aspect of American life. This foundation springs from the deep historical roots of racism, classism, ethnocentrism, and sexism in American culture and its institutions. This type of thought is so much a part of the American landscape that at times it is difficult to recognize. Consequently, what are campaigns against this form of thinking sometimes become substitutions of different forms of deficit thinking (Fuchs, 1995; Pearl, 1997; Scheurich, 1997). Such may be the case with alternative schools which have been lauded as effective models in improving the performance of students who are in an at-risk situation (Fenton-Dunn, 1998; McGee, 2001; Mottaz, 2002; Raywid, 1999; Reyes, 2000; Saunders & Saunders, 2002).

The concept of alternative education as a form more democratic in providing an equitable education is not new; it appeared as early as 1902 with the Progressive Era. The design of these schools as alternative learning environments was for the purpose of inventing and pursuing new ways to engage and educate students who were not successful in the traditional educational setting – especially poor and

minority students (Dunbar, 2001; Finn & Gau, 1998; Katsiyannis & Williams, 1998). As a result, by the 1970s a proliferation of alternative schools dotted the nation, providing the traditional settings with an alternative learning environment for students in need as well as an alternative to student expulsions. The following is a brief overview of the definition, history, design, models, students served, and the pros and cons of these alternative learning environments.

Alternative Schools

Raywid (2001) defines alternative education as “any school (or administrative unit) within a system of differentiated schools or units that are available on a choice basis” (p. 191). Lehr and Lange (2003) cite the U.S. Department of Education definition as “a public elementary/secondary school that addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, provides nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to a regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special education or vocational education” (p. 59). According to Dunbar (2001), the “perception of alternative schools has

shifted from the ideal of choice to one in which (in certain situations) students are assigned" (p. 29). Although a common definition does not seem to exist upon which most practitioners, administrators, scholars, researchers as well as policymakers agree, there is a consensus that alternative schools are designed for students who are at-risk of school failure.

From their inception alternative schools were designed with the flexibility to adapt specifically at the school level to fulfill the unmet needs of traditional education. They were conceived as a response to the public dissatisfaction with public schools as well as to the impact of societal change (Fenton-Dunn, 1998; Gregory, 2001; Groth, 1998; Katsiyannis & Williams, 1998; Nealy, 1994; Raywid, 1999; Reyes, 2000). Consequently, Mottaz (2002) states that by 1995 there were 2640 alternative schools, and, according to Coeyman (2000), that number has increased to about 10,000 public and private alternative schools in the United States. These very different schools first appeared in the private sector and eventually appeared in the public learning

environment with the concepts, theories, and ideas advanced by humanistic psychology (Fantini, 1974; Neumann, 1994).

Two alternative types of school design – the urban and suburban alternative models - surfaced with different aims. The urban model focused on the minority and poor students who were not succeeding in the traditional educational setting. The suburban model developed into innovative programs that looked at inventing and pursuing new ways to educate students. These two designs of alternative schools continue to thrive and, due to their early appearance of success, have paved the way for a proliferation of other purposes that include educational alternative services at the juvenile justice level (Fenton-Dunn, 1998; Katsiyannis & Williams, 1998; McGee, 2001; Nealy, 1994). Regardless of the design type, most alternative schools either fall under one or are a combination of three student service models: 1) Schools of Choice, 2) Last Chance Schools, or 3) Remedial Schools (Fenton-Dunn, 1998; Nealy, 1994; Neumann, 1994; Raywid, 1994).

Schools of Choice. These schools attempt to be more humanistic as well as challenging. Some of the

characteristics of these learning environments are voluntary affiliation, multi-age classrooms, self-paced, and creative forms of evaluations. The overall climate of these programs is positive in nature. The idea is that these innovations will simultaneously increase the interest and success of at-risk students.

Last Chance Schools. These schools are known as the last resort to expulsion and sometimes referred to as “soft-jails” (Gregory, 2001). They are schools highly structured as well as punitive in design with an emphasis on behavior modification and/or remediation. In some states these schools are mandated; i.e., in Texas, these schools fall under Senate Bill 1, Chapter 37, Discipline, Law and Order (Malinowski, 2001).

Remedial Schools. The focus of these schools is on academics and/or social-emotional issues. Therapeutic intervention strategies provide a basic foundation with a major emphasis on counseling and social supportive services to help eliminate the student’s problems. Student assignments to these schools are usually temporary

assignments with the return to mainstream upon successful completion of the program.

Students Served

Students served in alternative schools during the 1960s were different from the present students served. According to Dunbar (2001), who cites Duke and Muzio (1978), alternative programs at that particular time “attract[ed] predominately academically competent, white, middle-class students” (p. 32). Although alternative schools continue to serve students who are at-risk of school failure, a high percentage of the population served recently is poor and minority. The definition of at-risk, therefore, is varied, and the following are some of the characteristics that fall under that label: racial/ethnic minority and low socio-economic status, language disadvantage, single parent household, poor academic performance, alcohol/drug problems, delinquent behavior, pregnant, student parent, homeless, gang membership, etc. Consequently, alternative schools today have a disproportionate representation of minorities - many of whom are poor and Hispanic.

Alternative Approach

Understanding the varied conditions that exist in families, educators in alternative schools look at how to support and nurture students in the learning environment. Consequently, Conrath (2001) states that “Home is the most unequal environment in education, and school should be an arena of equity.” He postulates that “Alternative schools can help many…young people overcome their most debilitating handicaps” (p. 585). Raywid (2001) reinforces this view as she states that when students do not thrive in one school environment another environment is needed – “[what] we must change [is] the experience of school” (p. 582). Consequently, the design of alternative schools is more of a programmatic approach to institutional factors and processes that support and prevent students from dropping out.

Therefore, alternative schools moved away from focusing on the individual as the problem to looking at the institution and the factors that influence dropping out behavior. Specifically, alternative schools have had an impact on four areas: 1) the student composition - social, 2) the school resources – pupil/teacher ratio, 3) the school

structure - size, and 4) the school's policies and practices (Rumberger & Rodriguez, 2002). In this sense alternative schools make a difference. Accordingly, steps toward designing successful learning environments from the alternative point of view are not difficult because, when it comes to schools, their belief is that one size cannot possibly fit all (Hartzler & Jones, 2002; Raywid, 2001).

The success of establishing equity in learning environments, according to Conrath (2001), "calls for [schools to use] different means to bring everyone to the same end" (p. 587). Therefore, simple elemental changes like the size of the school – from big to small – can and do enable unsuccessful students to become successful. Apart from small size schools, the following are a few program characteristics that define not only effective alternative education schools but schools that successfully serve students of Mexican heritage: humanistic and ethical leadership philosophies, high expectations, small class size, program flexibility, site-based management, extended roles of teachers, caring and committed staff, non-threatening/non-competitive environment, student-centered

curriculum, and minimization of tracking (Cox & Davidson, 1995; Hanushek, 1998; Johnson & Wetherill, 1998; Neumann, 1994; Raywid, 1999; Rumberger & Rodriguez, 2002; Scribner, 1999; Scribner & Paredes-Scribner, 2001; Skrla, Scheurich & Johnson, 2000; Young, 1992). Consequently, according to the alternative philosophy, factors that influence the student's positive educational engagement depend on these elemental changes in the school environment.

Pro and Cons of Alternatives

Measuring outcomes and documenting effectiveness of these approaches in alternative schools has been a focal concern, especially with the recent standard-based school reform movement and accountability push. Central to this concern, according to Dunbar (2001), is the "ambiguity about the objectives [of alternative schools]" (p. 32). Dunbar (2001) further states that until this issue is resolved the question of alternative school effectiveness will continue to be inconclusive. Yet, according to Lehr and Lange (2003), even with the lack of rigorous research on alternative schools, research in general concludes improvement in the overall satisfaction and self-esteem of students. This view

is reinforced by others like McGee (2001) in a testimonial *"Reflections of an Alternative School Administrator,"* reporting dramatic test score increase by students with one student increasing as much as "77 points in language arts and…55 points in math" (p. 588).

Consequently, Groth (1998), investigating an urban dropout-prevention program, states that alternative programs create "an effective alternative [through these approaches] for helping at-risk students remain in school" (p. 227). Others, like Bauman (1998), state that students in alternative environments "acknowledge that the [small] class size means they get [more] individual attention" (p. 267). Even though research has failed, according to Hanushek (1998), to make a very convincing case that reducing class size improves student performance, he further states that "there are likely to be situations – defined in terms of…specific groups of students…where small classes could be very beneficial for student achievement" (p. 33).

Sagor (1999) sees alternative school approaches as beneficial in many ways; he has "embraced alternative education for its successes in providing a safe and caring

haven for youth" (p. 72). Sagor further states that while academic performance data is generally positive, the major benefit appears to be the individual's development of social relationships. Consequently, according to Saunders and Saunders (2002), students report their alternative school personal experience as "significantly better than [the experience from] the schools they left" (p. 12). It is because of these approaches that Neumann (1994) states that students in alternative learning environments are "empowered in the educational process" (p. 549). Consequently, Raywid (2001) concludes that alternative schools, because of their success with at-risk students, have "already been extensively used as a model for realizing diverse aims" (p. 192).

On the other hand, these diverse aims appear to be catching on in many parts of the country with different results - especially as the focus is more and more on disruptive students (Dunbar, 2001). Cox and Davidson (1995) found that although "alternative education programs have a small overall effect on school performance…[there was] no effect on delinquency" (p. 219). According to Escobar-

Chaves, Tortolero, Kelder, and Kapadia (2002), “the prevalence of violent behavior [by alternative school students]…is higher compared to regular high school students” (p. 357). Consequently, there is an uncertainty in the literature as well regarding the effectiveness of student engagement and safety in alternative programs (Davison-Aviles, Guerrero, Howarth & Thomas, 1999; Dunbar, 2001; Fantini, 1974; Groth, 1998; Katsiyannis & Williams, 1998; Ruebel, Ruebel & O’Laughlin, 2002; Secada, 1999).

According to Sakayi (2001), one of the student barriers to effective engagement in alternative environments is resistance because “students resented being pulled out of the ‘regular’ environment” (p. 419). This resistance, according to Tice (1994), is due in part because students expect alternative schools to be different, but they “are not very far from conventional schools in structure or practice” (p. 45). Consequently, a high percentage of alternative programs track specific populations from low academic achievers to delinquents (Cox & Davidson, 1995). This tracking occurs, according to Johnson and Wetherill (1998), because “alternative school programs and practices

are designed to remove disruptive students [academic or behavioral] from the regular school" (p. 177). Although the focus of alternative schools is to nurture and support students, it appears that order continues to be a general social value of high importance in education. Therefore, in order to maintain order in the traditional academic learning environment, alternative schools are a necessity (Dunbar, 2001; Fowler, 2000; Johnson & Wetherill, 1998).

Consequently, according to Tobin and Sprague (2000), "Given the number of students who are dropping out of or being expelled from traditional educational programs [due to school discipline policies], the need for alternative education programs is clear" (p. 184). Because of this on-going concern of maintaining order and control in the traditional educational environment, the population has increased in alternative programs – especially of students from low socio-economic status and minorities. This specific population increase, according to Redding and Shalf (2001), raises "a legitimate concern that alternative schools will become dumping grounds for students with discipline problems, and that, by virtue of grouping together

misbehaving and delinquent children, alternative schools may have criminogenic effects" (p. 324). Consequently, these factors impact school success, according to Ronda and Valencia (1994), because they "[are] ultimately tied to the quality of the learning environment" (p. 391).

Zero tolerance school policies, according to Dupper and Bosch (1996), have impacted minority and poor students in disproportionate numbers; they found that students who are repeatedly suspended suffer academically and are also more likely to be retained, thus decreasing the possibility of school success and increasing the possibility of dropping out of school (Rumberger & Rodriguez, 2002; Skiba & Peterson, 2000). According to Dunbar (2001) and Morrison and D'Incau (1997), it is these students who are most often expelled or recommended to alternative programs. Consequently, these expulsions have resulted in near epidemic numbers of at-risk students being removed from their home campus to alternative environments. This is due in part, according to Skiba and Peterson (2000), to the broad interpretation (from behavior to include academics)

over time of the discipline policy of zero tolerance in education.

Mandated standardized testing is another characteristic of the standards-based school reform movement that is not only impacting the effectiveness of alternative school programs but the performance of Mexican American students as well (Lehr & Lange, 2003; Valencia, 1999; Valencia, Villarreal & Salinas, 2002). According to Coeyman (2000), mandated testing leaves fewer options in “choice” alternative instructions and assessments. Consequently, according to Raywid (2001), “[testing] threatens…the success of the unsuccessful student: it buttresses standardized curricula and programs, teaching as didactic informing and drill, and schools that function primarily as giant dispensers of both” (p. 584).

Apart from the concern regarding the academic performance of students in alternative schools, one particular factor to which Sagor (1999) points is that many alternative schools are stand alone entities separated from the home campus. He further states that as such “the segregated nature of alternative education makes the

development of the interpersonal skills necessary for success in a diverse society more than unlikely" (p. 75). Consequently, this good intention to separate and nurture at-risk students reproduces a form of segregation through the standard-school reform movement. As Scheurich (1997) postulates, "One of the worst racisms, though, for any generation or group is the one that we do not see, that is invisible to our lenses, the one we participate in without consciously knowing or intending it" (p. 148).

There is no doubt that the commitment and efforts in the design and support of alternative programs are sincere, as much of the literature review affirms. Yet, for all the lauded results, there is no strong research evidence of the measuring of positive academic performance. Consequently, according to Secada (1999), the 1998 Hispanic Dropout Project which visited alternative schools around the United States failed to "find compelling evidence that alternative programs 'work' in the sense of enabling [Hispanic] students to finish secondary school with a high-quality academic program" (p. 93). This lack of high-quality academic

evidence is a concern because it contributes to the influence on school completion.

Consequently, according to Ruebel, Ruebel and O'Laughlin (2002), even with the two most impacting factors for which alternative schools are known, the "smaller class sizes and greater one-to-one attention…to address the issue of engagement," they found that 35% of the students in an alternative school dropped out in a mid-size city in the Midwest – identical to a previous study of alternative school dropouts in which the authors cite Morgan-D'Atrio et al., 1996, (p.60). These studies reinforce what Roderick (1993) states, that the dropout rate increases with the proportion of at-risk students in the school as well as with the increase in discipline problems; the greater the differentiation – the variance in socioeconomic factors, academic performance, etc., across the student body - the higher the dropout rate.

Summary

The review of the literature on the historical background of Mexican Americans, the social class, the research on Mexican American student failure, and the effectiveness of alternative schools reveals that the influence of student engagement in education is a complex phenomenon. Yet, there is an extensive body of literature that specifically focuses on the student and his/her social and economic background as the factors for failure. This particular literature often leaves the institution and the social structure free from possible causal factors (Valencia, 1997). Multiple factors such as the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of teachers, administrators, and counselors, and individual student qualities and background have not been taken into account – most school failure has been explored primarily from a single perspective. Consequently, very little is known about the factors that mediate Mexican American at-risk students' academic success (Alva, 1995; Valdes, 1997).

It appears that macro-level factors, to a certain extent, contribute to a reproduction of class relations, and educational environments play an important role in such reproduction. The question of how individual members of society in particular institutions actually bring about such reproduction is an area some scholars believe is recreated at the interpersonal level in the school setting. Although many school districts collect some data from graduates and assign a reason to code those students who drop out, this data provides little understanding of the inter/intrapersonal school experience. Consequently, a qualitative case study is appropriate to extract valuable in-depth information about how Mexican American at-risk students successfully navigate their school experience or why they really left school (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Garza & Gallegos, 1995; Patton, 2002; Valdes, 1997; Yin, 1994).

Chapter Three

Research Methodology

Introduction

> "This mode of research brings the study of human beings *as human beings* to center stage" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982, p. x).

According to Patton (2002), personal experiences are personal and only each individual can describe her/his unique experience of that conscious awareness called reality. Therefore, Mexican American at-risk students need to be allowed to share such personal educational experiences in order to determine the factors contributing to their completion or non-completion of school in the alternative educational environment. How each individual student sees, feels, and thinks is information that is critical to educators in meeting at-risk student needs. Consequently, looking at the interaction between the student and the environment, from the student's lived experience – from their own frame of reference, is crucial to understanding the factors that contribute to the completion or non-completion of school (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982).

This chapter contains a discussion of the research design, participant selection, instrumentation and preparation, data collection procedures, data analysis, trustworthiness of the study, and the limitations of the study. The purpose of this study is to examine the factors that contribute to Mexican American at-risk students' school completion or non-completion in the alternative educational environment. The research question guiding this study is: What are the perceived factors that contribute to the completion or non-completion of school of Mexican American at-risk students, specifically in the alternative educational environment which is designed to support all at-risk students, from the students' points of view?

Research Design

Qualitative Methodology

This study used a qualitative research methodology. The objective of this methodology is to attempt to understand the meaning of an experience – what is occurring in a natural setting (Bass, 1988; Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Marshall and Rossman (1999) state that "Qualitative research

genres have become increasingly important modes of inquiry for the social sciences and…education" (p. 1). Qualitative research is particularly well suited to exploring questions which relate to how others see and experience the world – seeking to understand the participants' experiences (Creswell, 2002; Darlington & Scott, 2002). The particular and specific focus of the study - how Mexican American at-risk students experience the alternative learning environment – requires the implementation of qualitative methodology. Yin (1994) states that research questions "of 'how' and 'why'…are likely to favor the use of case studies" (p. 7). A qualitative case study is, thus, the most effective method when the researcher is conducting research about individual lived experiences and the researcher has little control over the environment in which the study is to be conducted.

Using a Case Study Methodology

The case study method, according to Stake (1995), is a pre-selected "bound system" that is particular; that is, there is an emphasis on the uniqueness of the case. The particularization in this case study is the unique

experience of four Mexican American male at-risk students' completion or non-completion of a high school diploma in two alternative educational environments. The cases focused on the alternative learning environment as well as the home and community context. The aim of this case study is a detailed examination of four particular cases (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). The particular focus by this researcher was to discover and understand the beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and other individual adaptations that affect school completion or non-completion of Mexican American male at-risk students in the alternative educational environment.

A qualitative multiple-case design was used to conduct this study. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1982), when two or more subjects or settings are studied, researchers are doing multi-case studies. Furthermore, the collection of data in this multi-case study was through interviews, document analysis, and observations (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Darlington & Scott, 2002). Accordingly, Yin (1994) states that "a major strength of case study data collection is the opportunity to use many different sources of evidence" (p. 91).

Participant Selection

Selection Criteria

The study was done with purposefully selected participants (Bodgan & Biklen, 1982; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). The four participants in this study were selected using the following criteria:

- Mexican American (eighteen years or older) male born in the United States
- Graduated and/or dropped out in the last two to three years (after 2000) from an alternative program in Texas

Sampling

A purposive sample was employed to select the individual participants in this study. Purposeful sampling is used to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomena being studied. The goal of purposeful sampling, according to Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996), is to select cases that are likely to be information-rich with respect to the purposes of the study. In this instance, the criteria in the selection of the participants was based on the students' lived experiences that may contribute to the goal of the

study: Why Mexican American at-risk students who have difficulty (academic or behavior) in the traditional educational setting and transfer (by student choice) or are transferred (sent by the administration) to an alternative school for completion of the educational requirements either graduate or drop out.

Instrumentation and Preparation

Researcher as Instrument

The primary instrument in the collection of data in qualitative research is the researcher. The researcher's goal is to increase the participants' level of comfort, to build relationships – this is what research refers to as naturalistic style. This naturalistic style increases the opportunity for the researcher to develop trust with participants, leading to a less formal relationship in which the participants confide in the researcher (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Patton, 2002).

I have been involved in the alternative education (grades 9-12) system for the past ten years. Prior to entering the educational field, I was a counselor in the

fields of mental health and alcohol and drug treatment in the states of California and Texas. I am bilingual as well as bicultural. My background of educational experience and personal lived experience as a Mexican American provides excellent preparation for this study. Similar lived experience (low-socioeconomic status, language, disadvantaged, etc.) and a similar cultural background, such as mine with the participants, can contribute to better understanding of the participants' meaning of the phenomenon which the researcher is studying.

Field Procedure

A semi-structured interview guide was used during the three one-on-one, in-depth, 90-minute interviews with each participant. The goal of the interview was to gather descriptive data in the participants' own words in order to develop insights as to how the participants interpret their experience of the alternative educational journey (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982).

Field Preparation

The following items were part of a field packet that the researcher used to support data gathering in the field:

two tape recorders (one battery operated and one electrical with battery support – Califone-3432AV), special Omnidirectional Boundary microphone, extra batteries, several 110-minute professional quality cassettes, interview guide, writing material, an Inspiron 4100 laptop computer, and a digital camera.

Interview Preparation

I made the initial contact through phone calls and home visits with each participant to explain the study and establish the date and time of the first interview. I quickly established rapport and obtained written permission from each participant in the study. This first communication established the beginning foundation of trust that allowed me to gather further information needed on the participant's situation – where he lived – as well as the opportunity to provide the participant with any additional information about the purpose of the study.

Interview Sites

The most comfortable as well as the most convenient interview site for all the participants was the home.

Consequently, all the interviews were conducted in each of the participants' homes.

Data Collection Procedures

Data was collected (between the fall of 2003 and the spring semester of 2004) through the following methods: 1) personal interviews, 2) review of school documents, and 3) personal observations.

The Interview

The personal interviews consisted of three semi-structured, in-depth, audio-recorded interviews. All the interviews were conducted at the participants' homes. The participants were fully apprised of the project, and a consent form was signed by the participants before any data was collected. I developed rapport and established trust in the process of engaging the participants in a qualitative research-type interview regarding how, according to Patton (2002), "they perceive…describe…feel about…judge… remember…make sense of…and talk about…[the experience]with others" (pg. 104). Each participant was interviewed three times.

The first session focused on the participants' first remembered experience of the educational learning environment and the transfer to the alternative school. The second session focused on the participants' specific behavioral experiences in the alternative learning environment. The third session focused on selected specifics from the two previous interviews which, according to Marshall and Rossman (1999), "joins[ing] these two narratives to describe the individual's essential experience with the phenomenon…[and to look for the meaning of the alternative learning environment experience](pg. 112).

Review of Documents

Documents, according to Patton (2002), "provide the evaluator with information about many things that cannot be observed" (pg. 293). As such, the review of documents is an unobtrusive method that provides rich data portraying the values and beliefs of participants in the setting (Darlington & Scott, 2002). Therefore, as the second form of data collection, I met with the schools' administrators and acquired documents concerning the policies, rules, and

regulations of the alternative school which serve to enhance the interviews.

Observation

The third and final form of data collection was through personal observation. Observation is a very effective way of finding out what people do – a useful way of understanding the context of the phenomenon (Darlington & Scott, 2002). According to Patton (2002), observations "permit the evaluation researcher to understand a program or treatment…not entirely possible using only the insights of others obtained through interviews" (pg. 22). Therefore, I visited the schools several times and engaged in conversations with the schools' administrators, took pictures of the schools, and made visits to the participants' community and took pictures. During these conversations and observations, I kept a written record of the events observed.

Data Analysis

The data in this study was analyzed following typical qualitative research methodologies. Data analysis consisted

of organizing and recombining the evidence through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and/or verification (Miles & Huberman, 1984). This organization and recombining of the data was on-going after interviews and as data collected was transcribed. Transcribing the tapes was the most tedious task and took many hours of work. The transcription was coded, and categories were synthesized for interpretations. I made every effort to set aside all pre-judgments in order to be fair and objective in order to discover the meaning of the experience of the phenomenon under study (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Finally, a cross-case analysis was used in search of patterns and themes that cut across the participants' experiences (Patton, 2002).

Trustworthiness of the Study

Any credible research strategy requires that the investigator adopt a stance of neutrality with regard to the phenomenon under study. To ensure that this was done, I took special care to be balanced, fair, and conscientious in taking account of multiple perspectives, multiple interests, and multiple realities in order to meet the criteria of

trustworthiness (Patton, 2002). According to Marshall and Rossman (1999), the criteria for judging the trustworthiness of the qualitative paradigm are as follow: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

In order to ensure that findings are credible, I used open-ended questions in the interviews to enable me to understand and capture the points of view of the participants without predetermining those points of view through prior selection of questionnaire categories. The use of multiple sources of data (triangulation) also provides a broader understanding of the complex phenomenon. The three long interviews (being there with the participants) as well as being in the environment (the alternative setting) and in the home/family setting increased the likelihood of a triangulation of the phenomenon under study. The review of emerging findings with participants (member checks) further ensured participant validation of the phenomenon under study. Finally, I engaged in dialogue with my dissertation committee (using a critical friend) as “peer debriefers” which helped ensure the intellectual quality and design of

the study (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Patton, 2002; Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

Transferability

Transferability is a direct function of the similarity between two contexts. According to Marshall and Rossman (1999), “the burden of demonstrating the applicability of one set of findings to another context rests more with the researcher who would make that transfer than with the original researcher” (p. 193). An effective way for other researchers seeking to make a transfer, according to Patton (2002), is through reasonable extrapolations from information-rich samples. Extrapolations are speculations on the applicability of findings to other situations under similar, but not identical, conditions. Therefore, all the data collected is being kept well organized for other researchers to review and further extrapolate information-rich samples from the data upon request.

Dependability

Dependability accounts for changing conditions in the phenomenon chosen for study (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Since the qualitative research perspective is based on the

assumption that the social world is always being constructed, I paid careful attention to the procedure of the data collection and data analysis. In addition, the process of triangulation strengthens a study by combining methods and optimizing dependability (Patton, 2002). Accordingly, I constantly monitored the data-gathering techniques employed for possible distortions. This persistent evaluation and reevaluation of the data ensures the on-going effort to search for negative cases that strengthen participant credibility.

Confirmability

Confirmability, according to Marshall and Rossman (1999), captures the traditional concept of objectivity. The qualitative criterion then is: do the data help confirm the general findings? Consequently, how the data is gathered through the different methods and how it is organized is of critical importance since the accumulation of data generated from the various methods (interviews, observations, document analysis, etc.) was enormous. Therefore, I kept a day-to-day activity log of the decisions and rationale I made, documenting the emergence of the methodological design as

well as keeping a record of assumptions and questions. In addition, I maintained a personal reflective journal. I have all the raw data collected organized (field notes, taped cassettes, data reduction, data analysis products, personal notes such as reflective notes, etc., and instrument development information-interview procedures) for other researchers to re-analyze the data upon request.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited by several possible factors. The Hawthorne Effect questions the reliability of the reports given by the individuals due to their knowing they are specifically singled out participants of a study (Diaper, 1990). The size of the sample in this study is limited to four (4) adults, and the participants are all residents of the state of Texas. The gender of the participants is all male, and their ethnicity is Mexican American between the ages of 18 and 23.

Summary

Understanding the human experience of education can often best be expressed at the individual human level. Accordingly, qualitative methodology was ideal for getting close to that lived human experience and the meaning of Mexican American at-risk student school completion or non-completion in the alternative educational environment. To capture in words the emotions, the fears, the beliefs of any human struggle is to give voice to that spirit of hope that is the affirmation of success that exists between life and death. Thus, this study provides educators and policy makers with the Mexican American at-risk students' voice in their lived human experience of the alternative educational system – hopefully in order to effect positive change.

Chapter Four

> "when I went to enroll [at the alternative school]…*me dijeron* [they told me]…once you enroll here you can't go back…to the other school." (Jose, 1/31/04)

Narrative Report of Interview Transcripts and Findings

Introduction

Research that focuses on deficiencies in terms of personal and familial characteristics continues to be the most widely used method to explain Mexican American student school failure. Although school districts collect data from graduates and assign a reason to code those students who drop out, this data provides little understanding of the students' inter/intra-personal school experience. This study has provided Mexican American at-risk students an opportunity to express their personal beliefs and experience about the factors that contribute to their completion or non-completion of school in an alternative learning environment. The following research question guided this study:

What are the factors that contribute to the successful completion or non-completion of school for Mexican American

at-risk students in the alternative educational environment as seen from the perspective of the students themselves?

This chapter presents a narrative description of the transcribed interviews and results of the data. First, this chapter provides a brief overview of the demography where the participants reside, followed by a personal profile of each of the participants based on the interviews, phone conversations, and direct observations. Second, a description of the setting where the interviews took place provides a view into the environmental setting where each participant resides. The themes that emerged from the data collected and the factors identified by each student as contributing to the completion or non-completion of school follows. Finally, the chapter concludes with a cross-case analysis of the emergent themes common to the four cases and summarizes the finding of the study.

Demography

The four participants live within the Metroplex area of North Central Texas. Population range for the cities where the participants reside in the Metroplex is 39,018 to 534,694 according to the 2000 census for the two sites where

the alternative schools are located. The population age 25 years-plus 9th to 12th grade with no high school diploma is 4,492 to 47,588 respectively for the sites. The Hispanic origin population is 7,771 to 159,368 for the locations. The unemployment rate is 5% and 6% respectively for the two cities. Below poverty level families number 766 and 16,331.

Case Studies

The following is a description of each of the four case studies. The participant profile is constructed from the interviews and observations and includes detailed information of the interview setting. All four participant interviews were audio-taped. The study was done with purposefully selected participants using the following criteria:

- Mexican American (eighteen years or older) male born in the United States
- Graduated and/or dropped out from an alternative educational program in Texas

The study uses the participants' first names by participant request, but the places where the participants

live are fictitious. The names of the schools are simply referred to as alternative school in this study.

Participant 1

Jose completion (J1CM)

Four interviews were conducted for Jose

J1CM-3, participant

P1-1, participant's mother

The first interview with Jose was conducted on Saturday, January 31, 2004 at his parent's home located at 3332 S. L. Street in the Metroplex area of North Central Texas at 2:10 in the afternoon. This first interview took place in the participant's family living room. A broad range of noises can be heard in the audio background as members of the participant's family go about a normal Saturday afternoon. The second and third interviews were conducted in the same environment.

The only interview with Jose's parent was conducted on the second scheduled interview that Jose could not keep due to a change in his work schedule. The interview with the mother was not audio-taped.

Jose was born in the Metroplex area of North Central Texas on December 6, 1984. Jose is of average height and slim with dark complexion skin tone and dark hair. He frequents a broad smile that lights up his face, and he seems to have an easy-going temperament. On our first meeting he was somewhat nervous and had a difficult time making eye contact with me. On this particular day he wore blue jeans and a light colored patterned long sleeve shirt. He told me that he was going to meet his girlfriend at the mall after our interview.

Jose told me that he has lived all of his life in the Metroplex area except for one year when he lived in Mexico when he was between six and seven years of age. Jose is bilingual but seems to be more comfortable with Spanish, and although I spoke to him in English, he spoke Spanish freely during all the interviews, especially during the first interview.

Although I had explained the study to Jose and he had already signed the consent forms, he seemed distant at the beginning of our first interview. After several minutes of friendly conversation regarding Jose’s truck, the work the

family was doing on the house, and the composition of the neighborhood, Jose informed me that from the beginning he did not like large schools like the regular school which he attended before he went to the alternative school. He stated that he would feel anxious in small places like the hallways with large crowds. Jose also informed me that he did not like math because he was not very good at it. He stressed that it was only due to the help of a counselor at the alternative school that he was able to pass the TAAS (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills); otherwise, he would not have graduated.

Jose informed me that he made the choice to attend the alternative school after an argument with one teacher about his continued tardiness to this specific class. He admitted that he was tardy to several classes due to inconsistent transportation as well as to not finding parking space when he drove the family car to school. Jose states that he walked out of an afternoon class when he was confronted by the teacher about his persistent tardiness. Jose states that the class was after the lunch hour. He would go home to eat, and returning to school he would have a difficult time

finding parking space. Consequently, during this confrontation Jose states he got into an argument rather than just listening to his teacher as he frequently did. This particular time he talked back to the teacher, trying to explain, but Jose states the teacher told him that if he was not serious about attending school, he should leave the classroom and not come back. Jose states it was the way the teacher had said not to come back that angered him, and he just walked out and went home.

Although Jose knew about the alternative school that he would eventually attend, he states that when he returned to school the following day, he spoke with a counselor who provided him with the information about attending the alternative school. Jose told me he had some second thoughts at first about the alternative school because of his conversations with his neighbor who was attending the school due to behavior problems. Jose knew of the negative image the school had but felt he had no other choice since he had already accumulated too many days out of several classes. He was also told he would get a high school diploma if he improved his attendance and did his work.

In conclusion, Jose states that he was further motivated by the short (four hour) day promised and the potential to work as well as the ability to graduate on time with his class – according to the counselor. He felt that he was not making progress at the regular school and had accumulated too many tardies and knew he would eventually face some form of discipline. Jose stressed that other than not making some of his classes and not doing well in math, he did not get into other problems while in school.

Although Jose witnessed gang fights and students under-the-influence of substances as well as students not performing in the alternative school, Jose was more positive throughout the interviews about the alternative school than about the regular school. He informed me that if he had not attended the alternative school he would not have graduated. He pulled out his wallet and proudly showed me the diploma issued at the alternative school. He felt that the school was very flexible, and he was able to negotiate both school and employment. He further stated that although many students in the alternative school were there for their misbehavior, Jose was able to make friends easily. He felt

that the students were not as uptight as certain student groups in the regular school.

Jose enjoyed the alternative school teachers because he said they would help him if he needed the help and did not harp on him. He stressed that the teachers would help anyone and everyone if asked for help, but they did not help if students did not ask. In particular, he enjoyed the small number of students per class and the closeness of the classrooms (all of his classes were on the same floor). A specific dislike Jose had about the regular school was the distance he had to walk in the regular school.

Jose states that some students talked back to the teachers and that was one of the things he did like about the school. He stated that probably the teachers did not say anything because the students were gang members and the teachers feared them. (Jose shared an experience about a school teacher in the regular school who was murdered in his apartment, and the word was out in the regular school that the teacher had disciplined some gang members, and they had done the deed.)

Jose stated that gang members as well as students who were there for behavior reasons did little work. He felt, from listening to them, that they were there only because they had to attend or their parents would be fined. Most of them, Jose stated, were just waiting until they turned eighteen years to withdraw. Jose was particularly aware that the majority of students in the alternative school were as he stated “Mejicanos.” At one moment during our interview he paused and smiled as he said, “I think I only saw one or two “gringos” who came in at different times of the day.” He also was aware that many of the girls were pregnant or had children. He explained to me that he felt there were so many Mejicanos, especially males, because they wanted to go to work while in school. And the girls needed to go to school half a day in order to take care of their children. He also felt that, like him, they probably felt more comfortable in the small school environment.

Jose states that he was only bothered once by a gang member. He stated he managed to stay away from the fights by getting as far away as he could before the fights would start. He stated that when he would notice that a fight was

about to begin (the behaviors of crowding by students), he and several other students would leave the area immediately. In doing this, he states that he was never close to fights when they broke out in the school so he could not be singled out as a member of either group.

Jose graduated from the alternative school, and at the time of these interviews, he was working two jobs to save money to enter a local community college. He had made contact with a counselor and was working out a schedule for the following semester. Jose informed me that he is interested in the criminal justice field.

Jose's parents are both from Mexico and speak very little English. Their home is a small modest house (a combination of brick and wood), located in an industrial area of the Metroplex, to which the family makes on-going repairs. The family had just completed putting tile on the front porch floor - the entrance to the house. I only spent time in the family's living room during my visits. One of the rooms next to the living room has an altar in which candles and other religious objects can be seen from where all the interviews were held. The living room floors and the

other visual rooms are linoleum-covered. The living room was furnished with a large wide-screen television, a couch, several small coffee tables, and a large easy chair where Jose sat during all our interviews. I sat on the couch and placed the microphone on the coffee table next to the easy chair, making it easy to record the interviews.

I met Jose's father briefly as he was leaving for work during a scheduled interview with Jose. Jose's father is a muscular not very tall stocky-built individual with dark complexion skin tone. He only spoke Spanish to me when I greeted him. I shared with Jose's father what I was doing, and he appeared to be comfortable with my presence. He did not ask questions of me. He acknowledged what I was doing with a smile and wished me well and excused himself as he was going to work. This was the only time I met and spoke with Jose's father.

I met and interviewed Jose's mother during the second scheduled interview with Jose. Jose's mother is a slim middle-aged woman with dark skin complexion, and she only spoke Spanish. Jose's mother is an at-home mother, and our conversation started with her informing me that Jose was a

child who, from the beginning, was not very fond of school. She stated that other than that Jose followed the family's decisions.

During our interview, she confirmed what Jose had mentioned regarding his discomfort in large crowed places and that Jose came home frequently during the week to eat lunch. When I asked her if she knew how Jose came about entering the alternative school, she said that at the time she did not know. She further stated that she was unaware at the time of Jose having problems in the regular school which led to his eventual enrollment in the alternative school. She explained that she never received a communication from the school regarding Jose's attendance or any other difficulties or problems with teachers as she had with her other children. (Two of her other children have attended the same alternative school due to non-attendance.) She stated that she was never informed that Jose had walked out of any class, and my information regarding this incident was the first time she had heard about this kind of behavior coming from Jose.

She told me that she never had problems with Jose but that Jose did want to drop out of school during this particular time (before he walked out from the class) in order to go to work full-time with his uncle in construction. (Jose also acknowledged this to me—wanting to work with his uncle--during one of our interviews.)

Jose's mother did not know about the alternative school at the time Jose made the decision to attend. She just knew, according to the information Jose provided, that the school would help him get a high school diploma, and if that was the case she and her husband were supportive. She informed me that she and her husband had had *platicas* [talks] with Jose about getting an education – especially during the time he wanted to leave school to go work for his uncle full-time. She stated that they had sacrificed much in coming to the United States to provide their children the opportunities this country had to offer.

Participant 2

Angel non-completion (A1NCR)

Five interviews were conducted for Angel A1NCR-3, participant

P2-2, participant’s parents – mother and stepfather

The first interview with Angel was conducted on Monday, February 23, 2004 at his parent’s home at 1918 C. Street in the Metroplex of North Central Texas at 6:15 in the evening. This first interview took place in the parents’ bedroom. The room is small and was furnished with a chest of drawers, a chair, a small coffee table, and a bed which took up a good portion of the room. Several noises can be heard on and off in the audio background as members of the participant’s family go about a normal Monday evening.

The second interview was conducted in the living room. Due to the remodeling efforts of the stepfather, the living room contained only a kitchen table with a small television set on top, a couch, and two fold-up metal chairs along the wall. The third and final interview was conducted in the parents’ bedroom as materials for the remodeling continued to be stored in the living room.

The interviews with Angel’s parents were conducted on several visits when Angel did not keep the scheduled interview. The parents were never interviewed together or on the same day, and the interviews were not audio-taped.

Angel was born in the northern region of the United States on January 2, 1985. Angel is of a darker complexion skin tone with dark eyes and hair and is of medium height. Angel is slim built and physically well-proportioned and stated that he stays in shape through his involvement in school sports, especially playing basketball, a sport he enjoyed at the regular school before he transferred to the alternative school. Angel spoke excellent English, and during our interviews he occasionally interwove Spanish words into the conversations.

According to Angel, he was exposed to the violence of gangs at an early age in the area where he was born. Angel informed me that the Latin-Kings were wide-spread in the area where he lived. He stated that one of his older brothers was in prison due to the gang problems. Angel states that he and his mother moved to Texas to live with the stepfather when Angel was in fifth grade. Angel said he adapted pretty well to the Texas schools.

Angel informed me that he made the choice to attend the alternative school after he started getting into frequent problems that resulted in ISS (in-school suspension) or OSS

(out-of-school suspension) as well as in the discipline alternative program. Angel stated that he would go off at times because of the “talk” that was common in the hallways of the school. Angel states that he did not make much of an effort the last year at the regular school after he learned that he could no longer play sports – especially basketball. Angel stressed that it was his involvement with basketball that kept him focused in school.

Angel stated that he started getting involved with other students who ditched school and partied rather than focusing on their academics. He informed me that he also had difficulties in school with academics, especially math, and this was discouraging for him because he felt he did not get the help he needed.

Angel explained that he dropped out of the regular school when he was charged with inciting a riot after a school fight in the cafeteria. Angel got emotional when I asked him to tell me about the incident. He said that because of his past problems, he was an easy choice and was just at the wrong place at the wrong time. He denied being the cause of the incident, but he did admit that he was in

the process of throwing some food when an administrator caught him. He states that the worse thing about the incident was being handcuffed in front of his classmates and escorted out of the school by the police like a common criminal.

Angel stated that he made the choice to attend the alternative school after the incident which got him expelled. During our interviews, Angel was both negative and positive about the alternative school environment. He felt that some teachers did not care about students in the alternative school. He also believed that students would be labeled according to what they had done in the regular school. He used the word “alike” in making references to the alternative student population – everyone was there because of some similar behavior – fighting, academic problems, drug use, gang involvement, etc., he stated.

On a more positive note, Angel stated that he liked the alternative school because the teachers were flexible, would help you on an individual basis, and they did not make a big deal when students did not complete their work. He stated that at the alternative school the teachers knew what they

were dealing with – students who needed help. At one point he felt that the teachers were “cool” and would let you do your thing as long as students did not bother other students. He also mentioned that students could sleep as long as it was done sitting up, and he went through the procedure to show me how it was done.

Angel was keenly aware of the use of substances in the alternative school. He stated that he knew who was a pot-head and who was there just to pick up girls; students were just doing their thing, according to Angel, as they had done at the regular school. He stressed that the majority of the girls were there because they were parents or were going to be parents. He was also aware that the majority of the students in the alternative were, as he stated, “Mexican.”

Angel stated that there were several gangs in the school. Mostly, these gangs were Mexican or Black, according to Angel, but they did not bother him. Angel stated students would leave at noon and would come back under the influence of a substance, usually marijuana or alcohol. Angel felt the teachers knew but would not do anything. He felt they were more concerned about students leaving school during the noon

hour and not returning for the rest of the day; they turned the names of students not returning in to the principal.

Angel made references to the small number of students in the classrooms, and the teachers not being as uptight about the dress code as the student code of conduct was in the regular school. Students, according to Angel, could come dressed as they pleased as long as they were not wearing gang-related colors. Although the alternative school was very flexible in many respects and certainly tried to help him with his school work, he felt that he had missed out meeting other students in the regular school. Consequently, he states that he kept going out with his girlfriend, and she eventually got pregnant.

Angel did not complete the alternative school because at the time he withdrew, he wanted to find work to help pay for the delivery costs of his pregnant girlfriend. During the course of the interviews, he was looking for employment in order to help support the child (recently born) and to be able to move out of his parents' house. During our interviews, Angel was also making plans to return to the alternative school and/or to enter a GED program. Although

Angel dropped out of the alternative school, he had more positive thoughts about the alternative school than about the regular school.

I met Angel's stepfather when I was first trying to make contact with Angel. Angel's stepfather is of small structure and heavy set and spoke only Spanish; he was friendly and stated at the beginning that Angel needed help. (Both of Angel's parents spoke only Spanish, and Angel informed me that he had served as interpreter during his mother's visits with school administrators for as long as he could remember.)

Angel's stepfather and I entered into conversations easily as I mentioned my past experience with house construction and renovation efforts. Angel's stepfather was working on their house, and at the time he felt it was an on-going and never-ending project. The home is a small modest wood-framed house in an older part of the Metroplex area. The property is located half a block from a main street that has high volume traffic.

Angel's stepfather informed me that he did not get into Angel's affairs because this would usually end in a

disagreement with his wife. He stated openly during our first conversations that half of the time he did not know where Angel was or if Angel would be coming home in the evenings. He stated that Angel would frequently stay with an aunt, a sister of Angel's mother, on the other side of town. Consequently, he did not know much about Angel's whereabouts and could not provide me with much information about Angel.

I met Angel's mother after the first interview with Angel. (Angel did not make the scheduled second interview.) Angel's mother is of medium height and built, was friendly and supportive and very interested in the study. She informed me that she felt that Angel's present depressed state was due to their moving to Texas, to not knowing his real father, and to the problems he had had in school. She was glad that I was doing the study and hoped that I would have the time during our interviews to speak with Angel about going back to school.

She thought that our conversations would help Angel return to school or get a GED. She informed me that Angel had problems on and off at the high school and that she had spent time meeting with school administrators. She stated

that she did not know if Angel was entirely to blame for the last incident which led to his removal from the regular school. She just knew it had cost her money to get Angel out of jail.

Angel's mother did not know very much about the alternative school at the time Angel made the decision to attend. She felt that if the school could help Angel get his diploma, she was in favor of Angel attending the alternative school. She felt the alternative school principal was a good person and believed the school could help Angel get his high school diploma.

Participant 3

Jimmili non-completion (J1NCR)

Five interviews were conducted for Jimmili

J1NCR-3, participant

P3-2, participant's mother and stepfather

The first interview with Jimmili was conducted on Wednesday, March 14, 2004 at 6113 B. Circle in the Metroplex area of North Central Texas at 1:28 in the afternoon. The second and third interviews were conducted in the same environment.

The interviews with Jimmili's parents were conducted on several visits during my efforts to locate Jimmili – one at his parents' home, the other outside Jimmili's apartment. The first interview was with both parents present at their home, and other was outside Jimmili's apartment with only the mother present. The interviews with the parents were not audio-taped.

Jimmili and his girlfriend live together in a modest apartment with their two children. The first interview was conducted in the living room, and the other two interviews were conducted in the children's bedroom. The entrance of the apartment is a combination of living room, dining room and kitchen. This combination room contained a dining table with four chairs, a couch, a medium-size television, and two small coffee tables. The children's bedroom is small with little room for furniture; a bed, a crib, and a chair took up most of the space. We held two of the interviews in the children's bedroom to give the children room to move around in the larger combination living room.

Jimmili was born in the Metroplex area of North Central Texas on November 20, 1983. Jimmili spoke only English.

Jimmili is a stocky, muscular, and heavy-built individual with a round face. During our first interview he was wearing blue jeans with a pull-over short-sleeved shirt that accentuated his heavy-set built. He is of light complexion skin tone with brownish colored hair. His English is excellent, and he spoke in a rather hurried manner. He made good eye contact from the beginning and appeared comfortable with the interviews. During our first conversation, I made a reference in Spanish as to how, through his mother and stepfather, I had come to locate him. Jimmili informed me at this time that he did not speak Spanish. He stated that he could understand some Spanish, but he did not speak it.

Jimmili informed me that for the most part he lived with his grandmother while attending school and that, consequently, there was little supervision. He stated that he spent most of his time growing up on the streets instead of going to school. Much of this time was spent with an uncle who was a few years older than Jimmili who was like an older brother to him. Jimmili explained that he was exposed to the life style of gangs throughout his school years. He told me that he was in and out of various schools – both

alternative (private non-discipline) and regular public schools.

Jimmili informed me that he would cut school to attend house parties during the school day and/or just not attend school in order to spend much of the time with his uncle. He explained that he had difficulties with reading as far back as he could remember, and this was one of the reasons he was uncomfortable in school. Jimmili informed me that he learned about the last alternative school he attended through friends and made the choice to attend after he dropped out of the regular school to work and support his girlfriend with the birth of their first child.

Jimmili was both positive and negative about the alternative school during our interviews. He liked the alternative school because it gave him flexibility to attend school and work at the same time. He stated that the problem he faced at the alternative school was that other students that he had had problems with in the regular school and community were also there or their friends were there. Consequently, Jimmili felt he had to constantly watch his

back, diminishing his focus on the academics he needed to pursue.

Jimmili stated that gang members—many of whom he knew--would just drop in the school to start a fight and leave. He stated these individuals would enter the school through the side doors, avoiding the security officers in the front of the school. This type of behavior Jimmili stated was common in the alternative school. He stated that the security officers spent most of their time at the front entrance or outside in front of the school where students hung out.

Jimmili stated that drugs were also common, and students came to school “stoned out.” He said that both teachers and security officers would know, but he claims the officers were there to stop the fights, and the teachers were supposed to take care of other problems – like students under the influence etc.,. He felt teachers feared the gang members--it was obvious since they would let gang members get away with almost anything as long as they did not threaten the teachers. He stated that these students would cuss during class and nothing would happen to them.

Jimmili stated that the majority of the students were Mexican and Blacks with few whites. He got along with some students in particular those he knew from other schools he had attended or through his uncle's acquaintances. He felt that the alternative school had too many students with the same kind of problems and that only caused more problems, especially for him.

Jimmili said that he tried to stay in the alternative school and complete, but he had too many personal and family problems outside of the school. He also admitted that he eventually started hanging out again with students who would leave school and got into non-productive behavior. He informed me that the alternative school tried to help him by offering him different programs as well as time-frames. He stated that he tried to do the work but that he needed someone to help him on an individual basis. Taking the work home did not serve him well. Jimmili explained that he also missed a lot of time from school because he was trying to provide for his girlfriend and a new born child, and he finally withdrew from the alternative school. During these

interviews, Jimmili was working as a laborer and was interested in finding and attending a GED program.

I met Jimmili's mother and stepfather outside their home during my first attempts to contact Jimmili. I interviewed them outside the house on their front porch. They were both supportive of the study and shared much information about their difficulties with the educational system in trying to get the services Jimmili needed.

Jimmili's mother felt that Jimmili was not helped enough and that was one reason he eventually dropped out of school. She stated that Jimmili had done well during his early years in school. She felt that as time progressed Jimmili was not given the attention he needed. When I explained the study and the three interviews, she was glad that I would have that much time to talk with her son and hoped that through my contact, Jimmili would become interested in returning to school or get into a GED program. She felt strongly that without a high school education Jimmili would never find a good job.

The second interview was with the mother outside Jimmili's apartment. Jimmili's mother had come over to

Jimmili's apartment to give Jimmili information regarding his grandmother's health since Jimmili did not have a phone. I had scheduled the second interview and met Jimmili's mother outside of Jimmili's apartment on her way home. Jimmili had to cancel the scheduled appointment due to family problems. During the second interview, Jimmili's mother had spoken with Jimmili and was supportive about the first interview and mentioned that Jimmili had talked to her about making an effort to find a school to at least get his GED.

Participant 4

Ricardo completion (R1CR)

Five interviews were conducted for Ricardo

R1CR-3, participant

P4-2, participant's mother and stepfather

The first interview with Ricardo was conducted on Thursday, February, 5, 2004 at his parent's home at 2224 H. Lane in the Metroplex area of North Central Texas at 5:45 in the afternoon. The second and third interviews were conducted in the same environment.

The interviews with Ricardo's parents were held during several scheduled times when Ricardo had to take his girlfriend to the hospital and was late for the interview. One interview was with both parents present, and one interview was with only the mother present. The interviews were not audio-taped.

Ricardo was born in the Metroplex area of North Central Texas on September 24, 1984. Ricardo is tall and slim with medium dark skin tone complexion, dark brown hair, and has a deep rich voice. On this first interview Ricardo was wearing a pair of brownish pants and a light-colored short-sleeved shirt, unbuttoned, exposing a white t-shirt. Ricardo appeared comfortable with me from the beginning and spoke in a calm voice. Ricardo spoke primarily in English but is bilingual and would intersperse Spanish words frequently during our interviews.

At the time of these interviews Ricardo was living with his mother and stepfather in a small modest home in an older part of town. The three interviews with Ricardo were conducted in the living room of the house. The living room contained a couch, an easy chair, a large television set,

several small coffee tables, and boxed items that crowded the room. During the first and second interviews, background noise is from Ricardo's younger twin stepsisters who came in and out of the house as well as from the window air conditioning unit in the living room.

Ricardo stated that he did not have too much of a difficult time with school in general. He felt that it was his love of music that sort of got him into difficulties with the school system. He informed me that early in his freshman year he and a group of friends, including his younger brother, were labeled as gang members. He further stated that this was due to the fact that they had formed a rap-group, and he called himself Prophet, a name he was told on various occasions not to write on school papers. This accusation of belonging to a gang led to other incidents (fights in and out of school, being accused of selling marijuana, etc.) that followed them because of their rap-group.

Ricardo states that what finally led him to believe that things would get worse in school was when he became aware that the school and the police department had him and

his group listed in a book that he referred to as the “gang book.” He informed me that he was surprised when he was asked to look at the book to see if he could recognize students who had jumped his brother during a school dance. Ricardo said, “I turned the page and there we were…they were our school ID pictures.”

Ricardo also informed me that he just did not focus on his school work in the beginning as a ninth grader and consequently fell behind on credits. This lack of credits led to eventually making the choice as a sophomore to attend the alternative school after he was informed by one of the school administrators that if he transferred, he could attend a half day, and he could also graduate on time.

Ricardo was more positive about the alternative school during our first interview than about the regular school. He felt that the way things were going he might not have graduated if he had stayed in the regular school. Ricardo stated that he knew there were gang members at the alternative school as well as alcohol and drug use but that he stayed away by removing himself. He states that he made

efforts to be friendly with the teachers in the alternative school, and, consequently, he got along well with them.

Ricardo felt the teachers were helpful and would give him individual extra time to complete his assignments because he always tried to do his work. He felt teachers wanted to help if the students wanted to be helped. He also felt that the teachers did the right thing in not helping those who did not care or did not asked for help. He was aware that a high percentage of students were Hispanic as well as the fact that many of the girls were pregnant or had children.

Although Ricardo had disagreements with several of the students in the alternative school, he states that he only had one incident while at the school. He stressed that if the incident had occurred in the regular school, he and the other student would have been expelled. He stated that he kept pretty much to himself or would hang out with other students who were more focused on getting their diploma. He even stopped hanging out with his friends and his brother--the members of his music rap group--and focused more on his

studies and his girlfriend who was now pregnant with their child.

Ricardo expressed more positive thoughts about the alternative school than about the regular school during all three interviews. Ricardo graduated from the alternative school he attended. During these interviews, Ricardo was unemployed and was looking for work. Ricardo and his girlfriend were expecting their first baby and were planning to move into a house which he and his girlfriend's father were fixing; this was one of reasons Ricardo did not make some of our scheduled interviews.

I met Ricardo's stepfather while attempting to make the first contact with Ricardo. He was outside of the house in the front yard, unloading odds and ends from an older model truck. Ricardo's stepfather is slim and tall and walked with a limp from a stroke he suffered several years ago. Scattered in the front yard were a variety of things that Ricardo's stepfather had accumulated over the years that were for sale. Ricardo's stepfather only spoke Spanish to me, was friendly, and informed me that Ricardo was making plans to move out and live with his girlfriend. This was the

reason, he informed me, that Ricardo was not home much of the time. He further informed me that Ricardo was spending much of the time working on a house with his girlfriend's father because Ricardo wanted to move in the following month. Apart from this information, Ricardo's stepfather did not share much about Ricardo's educational performance.

I met Ricardo's mother with his stepfather during the second scheduled interview. Although Ricardo's mother graduated from high school, she spoke primarily Spanish. During this first meeting, she promptly made a phone call and told Ricardo that I was waiting for him and to hurry home. While we waited for Ricardo and his girlfriend to arrive, Ricardo's mother informed me that she had constant problems with the educational system with both Ricardo and his younger brother.

Ricardo's stepfather said little during this interview but acknowledged the problems both Ricardo and his brother had in school. Ricardo's mother informed me that she had to take much time from work to attend to the boys' problems at school. The problems varied from attendance to paying constantly for student IDs, an item she felt strongly was

taxing on the family due to their income. In general, she felt that the school did not make a concerted effort to help her with the difficulties her sons were experiencing in school. She felt that many of the school issues about which she was called were never resolved. In closing, Ricardo's mother was glad Ricardo graduated from the alternative school.

Data Analysis Procedure and Findings

The study sought to answer the question: What are the factors that contribute to the successful completion or non-completion of school for Mexican American at-risk students in the alternative educational environment as seen from the perspective of the students themselves?

Four Mexican American at-risk students who attended alternative learning environments were individually interviewed three times to determine the factors that contribute to their completion or non-completion of school. During the process of interviewing the four students, I also met and interviewed the parents as well as visited the schools, met with school administrators, and reviewed the schools' program documents regarding policies and practices.

Analysis of the data began with interviewing each student three times, and each interview was audio-taped. The audio-taped interviews were then transcribed. I reviewed each interview with each participant before beginning the next interview. I next reviewed the transcripts several times for regularities and patterns. Further analysis of the data produced emerging themes and the factors within each theme that the participants perceived as contributing to their completion or non-completion of a high school diploma. Finally, a cross-case analysis of the themes common to each case is presented.

Findings

The results of the data analysis produced seven themes which are as follow: violence, indifference, separation, attendance, drugs, supportive environment, and lack of resources. The following is a brief description of each theme constructed from students' interviews, documents, and observations:

1. Violence

Exposure to the category of violence appears consistently among all four students in their lives and in both the traditional and alternative educational settings

(associating with gangs, fighting, conflict with other students and educators, etc.). All four students experienced increased exposure to violence at the alternative school. Any form of violence committed in the educational setting (i.e., fighting) is also a category in the student code of conduct that is punishable by out-of-school suspension (OSS) or in-school-suspension (ISS) and/or removal to a discipline alternative program for a certain period of time. Consequently, three of the participants experienced being removed from their home campus to one or more of these programs before entering the alternative school.

2. Indifference

The category of indifference is the behavior experienced by the students of personnel in the educational system not showing an interest or concern in general. The process of indifference was consistently perceived by all four students. These experiences covered a broad range of situations in which school staff did not provide information and/or counseling, did not provide specific direction, were disrespectful in the process of dealing with issues, etc. For example, students were not informed before withdrawing from the regular school that once they enrolled in the alternative school, they could not return to their home

campus or that the credits earned would not be accepted at the regular school. Inappropriate individual behavior (students under the influence, cussing, sleeping, etc.) was allowed and thus enabled. Individual's needs were disregarded (i.e., certain students – specifically, presumed gang-affiliated students – were not allowed to use the restrooms). These situations occurred in both the alternative and the traditional setting.

3. Separation

All four students experienced the feeling and awareness of separation to different degrees. Separation came in many forms from removal from participation with their class, moving to different schools, placements in specific programs by ethnic group or by class (low-socioeconomic/free-and-reduced lunch, etc.), in-school-suspension (ISS), and out-of-school suspension (OSS) to TAAS tutoring sessions during lunch period, expulsions, removal to a discipline alternative program and/or the individual belief that they had a "choice" to separate from the traditional setting in order to attend the alternative learning environment.

4. Attendance

The attendance theme is defined as not being present in either of the educational environments – the alternative or

the traditional setting. All four students participated in the experience of ditching school, cutting classes, not going to school, leaving school, being tardy as well as discipline removal (to ISS and OSS) for violations of the student code of conduct. The consequence of non-attendance (state policy) for a total of five unexcused days in one semester by students 18 years old is the student's withdrawal from school. State law requires that students must be in attendance 90% of the total school days each semester to be eligible to earn credit. Attendance is conveyed by each of the participants as the experience of not being able to attend to one's individual, family, or educational institution's need.

5. Drugs

All students were exposed to drugs in the educational environment and, in particular, with increased frequency in the alternative setting. Although exposed to an array of substances, not all four students were involved in the use of the substances during their educational experience. The substances most commonly mentioned were pills, marijuana, alcohol, and tobacco. The student code of conduct in school districts enforces the concept of zero tolerance. Thus the consequence for the student caught in possession of drugs is

the immediate removal to a discipline alternative program for a specific period of time. The tolerance to substance use in the alternative school is perceived by the participants as increased. Consequently the exposure and tolerance of substances contributes to the possible enabling factor to engage in this behavior.

6. Supportive Environment

The category of supportive environment for the four students is a broad umbrella of help and assistance that includes teachers being more helpful, listening, allowing students to support other students with their academic work; the experience of smaller classes, a shorter day with fewer subjects, a choice of day or evening school schedules, flexibility of rules, the ability to go to work during the school day, and a tolerance for student behavior not acceptable in the regular educational setting. All four students felt that the alternative environment was more supportive than their experience in the regular educational setting.

7. Lack of Resources

The theme of lack of resources is experienced by the four students as the inability to continue and complete certain classes in the alternative environment when they

transferred, a limited schedule of elective classes and student activities, a lack of educational material and library resources, having available only class sets of books that could not be taken home, the alternative school being housed in older buildings, the physical building not being maintained properly, and limited equipment and technology when compared with their experience in the regular school.

Discussion

One of the questions in which this study was interested was the impact of the specific alternative program approach in the four areas of 1) student composition – social, 2) school resources – pupil/teacher ratio, 3) school structure – size, and 4) school policies and practices particular to the completion or non-completion of a high school diploma.

Category six, the theme of supportive environment, confirms the positive impact of the specific alternative school program approach on the perceived experience of each participant in the alternative school. For example, 1) *student composition – social interaction* approach surfaces during one of the interviews with Jimmili. When asked “How were the teachers lecturing or how did they teach?” Jimmili responded in the following manner:

> I mean it was more like a buddy-buddy system, you know. I teach you and you kinda, you know, show me how it works. And then I take it from there. And everybody was more independent in other words.

Jimmili is expressing a different kind of learning experience he had not had or in which he was not allowed to participate in the regular school setting. This "buddy-buddy" system, as Jimmili refers to it, allows students to take time during a lesson to support each other. This learning approach creates a friendlier "family" atmosphere in which students can engage in the support of each other. It also provides the opportunity to build esteem, especially to those who are assisting others in need. Most importantly, this creates a cooperative environment of inclusion that believes that all students can learn.

Approach 2) *school resources – student/teacher ratio* arose during one of the interviews with Jose. To the probing question "When you talk about less students…tell me about less students…" he responded in the following manner:

> *aca unde yo iba* [over here where I went] [the regular school] *abilla* [there were] like 35, 40 students in the class….*Y* [and] in alternative school there was like probably like 5 people in each class or 10.

Jose, who had difficulties in the large crowded environments he experienced at the regular school, is most keenly aware

of the smaller classes in the alternative school. When Jose was sharing this information with me, I was aware of his facial expression reflecting an enjoyable experience.

The question about approach 3) *school structure – size* comes up in the probing question "So you think that it's possible that the number of students who were being served at [the alternative school] could be served at the regular school?" Ricardo responded in the following manner:

> Yeah. 'Cuz [the alternative school] is a small school…like maybe 200, 250 people, you know. And, I mean, they could take those teachers from [the alternative school] and give them a room at another high school.

Ricardo was not only expressing approval of the smaller size of the alternative school that he found to be supportive, but he was going into another level of possibility – why not create this kind of environment at the regular school?

The question about approach 4) *school policies and practices* came up several times beginning with the question "Tell me about [the alternative] school." Ricardo responded in the following manner:

> There wasn't no dress code. Only for like if you had crazy-looking hair, like if you had crazy color hair like pink or purple or bright red.

Although the same student code of conduct that guides the regular school is applied at the alternative school, Ricardo's experience reflects the effort and ability to create flexibility.

In regard to an incident at the alternative school, Ricardo further responded to the school policies and practices issue by answering the question "Would they have done the same thing at the regular school?"

> They [the regular school] probably would have sent us to [the discipline school], or something. 'Cuz we'd gotten up in each others face and stuff. And I pushed him, you know,_.they [the alternative school] would go another step farther trying_.talk to you more, try and resolve the problem.

It becomes clear from Ricardo's description that the school policies and practices are applied more in response to the needs of the students than to those of the institution.

Even though both of the alternative schools lack the resources that all participants were provided in their home campuses, the participants' perception is more positive toward the alternative school because of the program approach in the four areas and the school policy and practices of tolerance shown towards students' disruptive behavior. The faculty understands specifically why the

students are in the alternative environment and that relapses are going to occur – academic or behavioral.

Since violence is the dominant category experienced by the participants, it would appear to be a strong factor in non-completion as opposed to completion. Interestingly, violence does not have that result in this study. Two of the participants, one completion and one non-completion, have the most incidents of conflict in both the traditional as well as in the alternative learning environment.

The category of indifference does not appear to be a strong factor in the completion or non-completion. It appears to have less of an impact in the alternative environment as opposed to the traditional setting. For example, Angel does not see a difference to the change of his graduation plan from the recommended to the basic regular diploma. Angel responded in this manner:

> Yeah, they changed it [the graduation plan]….I was on the recommended plan the whole time in [the regular school]….it's the same diploma, I mean….It's a diploma….there's no difference to them – it's just a diploma.

The participants seem to accept without questioning the indifference behavior in the alternative setting, and this may be a result of the schools' lack of resources. For example, as mentioned, the category of violence is dominant,

and it is also a mandatory removal behavior in school districts. Yet, from the participants' perception, this behavior was approached with minimal concern by the alternative school and/or questioning by the participants. This is indicated in the extreme by Jimmili who responded to the probing question "So people could walk in through the back doors also if they wanted to?" in this manner:

> Yeah. I had friends that walked in and started fights, you know. And they ain't never went to school for a long time. They come in and they just, you know, start a fight.

This indifference behavior appears to be an element acceptable to the participants as part of the alternative environment. It becomes more clear, for example, when Jose responded to the question "The first day what did you…[see]". He answered in this manner:

> The first day, well *no me gusto* [I didn't like it] because…there were some people that we wouldn't get along and those people I'd seen up there and I was, like, oh there is going to be trouble.

Jose does not say that he intended to go to the school faculty or administration to resolve this possible problem. Problems are foreseen as part of going to the alternative school. It may be perceived as the trade for the flexible

and tolerant environment they will attend. In every case the students do not bring the school into the issue of dealing with these perceived difficulties or problems.

This perception is further expressed by Angel in response to the question of drugs in the alternative school; “Are there just as many substances, drugs, at the alternative as there were in the regular campus, or were there more, or less?”

> It was probably the same amount, it’s just at [the alternative school] everybody is like the same….over here at this school [the alternative school] they’re all like together, you know.

Angel sees the alternative environment as one which is clearly understood by all students to be a place where violence and drug use is highly probable because of the target population who attend. What Angel is alluding to is that he knew that students in the alternative school were there by choice or had been placed there because of academic or behavioral problems.

Consequently, the experience of the separation from the regular school is a category to which the participants have become indifferent but of which they are still consciously aware. For example, Jimmili attended a charter school that was not a public alternative school. He responded to the

question “OK, were there students there from the [discipline] alternative school?” in this manner:

> No. This was more of a better alternative school [the charter school] was not just some like the government opened up. You know what I mean, just like well we got to stick them [at-risk students] somewhere. We’ll open this up and just stick them there, you know. Just so they won’t bug anybody else.

Jimmili is aware of the difference between public and charter alternative schools. The language he uses to describe the two environments establishes a certain perception of separation and also establishes the conscious negative image at-risk students have of public alternative schools.

This experience of separation is probably best expressed by Ricardo in his final interview when he answered the probing question “After the first two interviews, what do you think, after reflecting?” Ricardo responded in this manner:

> The regular schools should have a program there on campus to help the people that need the extra help. You know, ‘cuz, you know, I liked it at the alternative school, but, you know, I missed my friends.

Ricardo’s internal feeling of missing his friends is an experience of separation. Separation causes the feeling of

missing out on something. In Ricardo's experience, it is his friends who stayed at the regular school.

The category of attendance is probably the strongest factor in the separation to the alternative school as well as in the completion or non-completion. For example, Jose responded to the question "So from the regular school, did they remove you when you were eighteen because you missed too many days?" in this manner:

> *No mas te decillan* [they would just tell you] you're eighteen, you know what you're doing, I mean you missed this many days so we're going to have to kick you out.

Jose is basically saying that once a student is kicked out of the regular school, the only choice left to complete is to apply to attend an alternative school.

Jimmili spoke to his need to attend to personal difficulties and attendance as the cause of his non-completion in this manner:

> I just kinda ditched out a day of school you know to spend time with her and my boy.…It just got contagious, addicting, and it was just constantly….I just didn't go no more.

Jimmili was well aware that he was missing too many days and falling further behind. It became clear to him that he could

not catch-up with his academic work – so he just stopped attending.

Angel responded to his need to attend to personal difficulties and consequently not attend school in this manner:

> I wanted to make some money for my girl who is pregnant all that time. And she had false labor and one day I just, I said, I gotta go, I got to start finding a job and stuff.

Angel's struggle is between attending school and attending to the need of finding a job to provide for the hospital cost of the delivery. Personal concerns play an important part in the completion and non-completion cycle.

The success of establishing equity in alternative schools, according to Conrath (2001), "calls for [schools to use] different means to bring everyone to the same end" (p. 587). These simple elemental changes like the size of the school – from big to small – are perceived by the participants in this study as contributing to their completion of a high school diploma.

The two alternative schools' program characteristics align themselves with the literature that has been found to

effectively serve students of Mexican heritage: humanistic and ethical leadership philosophies, high expectations, small class size, program flexibility, site-based management, extended roles of teachers, caring and committed staff, non-threatening/non-competitive environment, student-centered curriculum, and minimization of tracking (Cox & Davidson, 1995; Hanushek, 1998; Johnson & Wetherill, 1998; Neumann, 1994; Raywid, 1999; Rumberger & Rodriguez, 2002; Scribner, 1999; Scribner & Paredes-Scribner, 2001; Skrla, Scheurich & Johnson, 2000; Young, 1992).

Review of Documents

A review of several campus documents confirmed certain perceptions by the participants. For example, there was the question of whether a student could or could not return to the regular home campus. Although one alternative school stated that students could return to their home campus at any time during a semester break, the other school was not quite as clear as mentioned below.

Enrollment

The Student/Parent Handbook and brochures for both alternative schools make reference to enrollment being

voluntary and by personal choice. One school's brochure stated, "Once enrolled you will remain at [the alternative] High School through graduation" (1SHS, 2003-3004, 2). This particular school also did not allow the transfer of credits earned by students if they tried to return to the regular school. Both schools required the completion of an application and the attendance of parents if the student was not 18 years of age. An interview was scheduled between the applicant and the school administration – usually the principal or a vice-principal - before entrance to the program.

Behavior

Both alternative schools stated expectations of classroom behavior to be the same as the regular home campus (1SHS, 2003-3004, 1; 1SLC, 2003-2004, 1). The perception by the participants of tolerance as an exception appears to be supported in cross-analysis. The clear fact that students who attend alternative programs are at-risk and have accumulated one or more factors from the data categories indicates that the probability of these behaviors reoccurring is high since change, although evident, does not occur immediately but over a span of time. Consequently, if the expectations were to be upheld in the alternative school

as in the regular school (a reason many of these students are in the alternative environment), there would be very few students in the alternative environment.

Attendance

Both alternative schools followed the state law that students must be in attendance 90% of the total school days each semester in order to be eligible to earn credit. One school stated in their Student/Parent Handbook, “Students who arrive after the first 5 minutes of class will be counted absent” (1SHS, 2003-3004, 1).

Although there is tolerance for a broad range of at-risk student behavior in the alternative environment, attendance appears to be the exception. It may be because attendance is accountable to the school districts as one of the financial resources they must try to predict for future fiscal operations.

School Schedule

A review of both school schedules revealed the flexibility of alternative schools’ program approach. One alternative school provided a day and evening school schedule. The day schedule started at 7:30AM and concluded at 2:45PM. The evening schedule started at 3:00PM and

concluded at 9:47PM. Both alternative schools offered a GED program. Both alternative schools ran a four-class schedule.

Observations

Physical Building

A review of the visual physical school plants revealed and confirmed the perception by participants in the area of lack of resources. One alternative school is housed in what used to be the community's first high school. The other alternative school program is housed within a technical high school. Both structures are older buildings in the older sections of their respective communities. Although both alternative schools have security officers (one has three, the other one), I did not have any difficulties gaining access into the buildings nor was I checked by the security officers during any of my visits. During my visits, I entered through a side door at one school and through the front door at the other alternative school.

School Administration

There will probably never be a case study in which some administrators, or maybe even a whole district, will be more concerned about their image, political or otherwise, than about the issue of solving a problem in the education of all

children. However, five alternative schools with which I made contact did not provide me with the necessary student lists of completion and non-completion or return my phone calls, even though they committed themselves (orally or in writing) to the support of this study. Therefore, it was immediately obvious that the administrations in both of the alternative schools involved in the study were primarily concerned with and committed to the success of all at-risk students.

The administrations of both alternative schools were very supportive of the study. The administration of one school particularly believes the study will contribute to better understanding of how to support Mexican American at-risk students in the alternative learning environment, and they requested a copy of the study. Both administrations have a positive attitude toward helping all at-risk students.

The Community

All four participants live in the older sections of their respective communities. During these interviews, only one of the four students had recently moved and was living in a more recently developed area. The majority of the population where three of the participants live is Hispanic;

Jimmili resides in an area with more of an ethnic mixture. All four participants fall in the low-socioeconomic status.

The Family

The families of the four participants live in small modest homes. Three of the families were having difficulties with transportation – the on-going fixing of vehicles. One participant did not have his own transportation. One of the participants did not have phone services. Two of the four participants were actively looking for employment. Three of the participants had stepparents. Three of the four participants were bilingual. Three of the four participants are parenting. All parents of the four participants want all their children to complete high school as a minimum educational goal. Three siblings in one of the families have attended the same alternative school. One of the four participants was actively working with a counselor at a local community college to enroll in the spring semester. All four families fall in the low-socioeconomic status.

The document reviews and observations that I conducted support and add depth to the findings obtained in the individual interviews. This process serves as an important means of triangulation.

Common Themes Across Cases

There are three common themes across the four cases. The first theme is that attendance at the alternative school by each participant has led to a different educational and environmental experience. This different educational and environmental experience is supported by the following experienced factors:

- The classes tend to be smaller
- School population is lower (from 100 to 200)
- School day is shorter with less classes (usually a four-hour time frame with a four class schedule)
- Rules tend to be less restrictive and/or lax (district student code of conduct modified)
- Academics are basic state diploma standards (graduation plans change from recommended to basic)
- Curriculum and academic elective coursework is limited
- Access to substances due to same/like population is easy

A second common theme is that students attending an alternative school acquire the labeled at-risk. The label of at-risk in the alternative school signifies similarity and/or a same-ness in students' composition. This same-ness is supported by the following factors:

- All students have academic or behavior problems
- All students made the choice to attend the alternative school or were placed by the administration of the regular school
- Students as student parents or students in the process of becoming (pregnant) parents is common
- Students in the alternative learning schools are disproportionately minority

A third common theme is the awareness that the location of the alternative school is in older (second class) physical buildings. This experience is supported by the following factors:

- The two schools are housed in older building or within older programs in older buildings
- The two schools are in the older part of the community

These common themes across cases form an experience of separation. The separation is of students from the regular school to an alternative educational experience with limited resources and different socialization norms due to the same-ness of the student body composition. The housing of the alternative schools in older buildings, intentionally or not, reflects the view that the educational experience provided there is second class.

Summary

> Shortly after 1 a.m. Saturday Dec. 27, 2003 in the 3600 block of Hemphill Drive, a car pulled up beside Christina's car and someone shot her in the head with a shotgun. The killer or killers then sped away quickly, according to an article appearing December 28 in the *Metroplex Central Area S-Telegram*.

Although the concept of separating at-risk students for protection and nurturing is positive in building an educational foundation, violence is a common experience for many at-risk students in alternative learning environments. There is strong evidence that negative influences will impact many students when students with same-like behavior problems are separated and placed together (Escobar-Chaves, Tortolero, Kelder, and Kapadia, 2002).

The data from the participants' interviews reveal that there are five factors that impacted the separation of the participants to the category of at-risk and eligible for the alternative school environment. These five factors are as follow:

- Attendance
- Conflict/Fighting
- Gang membership and/or suspected involvement
- Poor Academic Performance

- Overage.

Interestingly, one would think that the more factors one accumulates, the higher the student's propensity would be for separation to the alternative environment. The data reveals that it only takes one of the factors from the list of five. It may be that these factors are affected by the popular mandatory removal from the regular school due to the zero tolerance philosophy and policy for weapons and drugs. Over time, the discipline policy of zero tolerance in education has broadened in interpretation from behavior to include academics as well (Dunbar, 2001; Morrison & D'Incau, 1997; Rumberger & Rodriguez, 2002; Skiba & Peterson, 2000).

It may also be the role that discretionary placement plays in the decision-making of educational administrators (Dupper and Bosch, 1996). That is, administrators are moving hurriedly to resolve an issue and not wholeheartedly in an educational student-centered focus but rather in the best interest of the whole – the school. Consequently, the participants in this study entered the alternative environment with one or more of the factors from this list of five and not because of an accumulation of the factors.

Although all the participants unequivocally laud the positive support the alternative school program made in

their personal and academic educational experience, the completion or non-completion of school at the alternative setting does not appear to reflect specifically on the contributions of the four alternative program approaches provided by alternative schools. This study suggests that the major factor for the non-completion participants is that both students had previously either dropped out or were disconnected in attendance from the regular school for a specific period of time whereas the completion participants had made the transfer without a break between the regular and alternative educational environments – a more seamless transition (Ruebel, Ruebel & O'Laughlin, 2000).

Chapter Five

Summary, Personal Reflections, Recommendations and Conclusions

Summary

History reflects the different treatment of Mexican Americans and the educational experience of Mexican American students since the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on February 2, 1848. Although much has changed in the educational system, there are constant barriers created through different although well intended programs that impact Mexican American students, especially students in an at-risk situation.

This study sought to examine the factors that contribute to Mexican American at-risk students' completion or non-completion of school in the alternative educational environment. The findings in this study suggests that the strongest factor that contributes to the completion or non-completion of a high school diploma by Mexican American at-risk students in the alternative educational environment is as follows: both of the non-completion participants had previously dropped out or were disconnected from the regular traditional school while the completion participants had made the transfer without a break between the educational environments.

This study also found that the specific alternative program approaches in the four areas of 1) student composition – social, 2) school resources – pupil/teacher ratio, 3) school structure – size, and 4) school policies and practices were perceived by the participants to be positive to their education in the alternative setting as was suggested by the literature review.

This study suggests from the data analysis that there are five factors that impact the separation of students to the category of at-risk and therefore eligible for the alternative school environment. These factors are as follow: 1) Attendance, 2) Fighting, 3) Gang membership and/or suspected involvement, 4) Poor Academic Performance, and 5) Overage. Consequently, there is a high same-ness in the characteristic composition of students in the alternative education environment. Clearly also in the alternative environment is the over-parity of Mexican American at-risk students. Although there is a high representation of low-socioeconomic students in the alternative environment, this study did not find this category to be necessarily a prerequisite for at-risk status.

The relationship between the seven themes (Violence, Indifference, Separation, Attendance, Drugs, Supportive

Environment, and Lack of Resources) that surfaced in this study is a strong concept of separation from more to less and vise versa. This is a separation of the human experience from more educational services to less educational services in the transition from the regular education to alternative education and vise versa in the experience of more in the exposure to at-risk behaviors in the alternative environment due to the same-ness in composition of the student body. It is also evident that it takes association with only one of five factors, not an accumulation of these factors, to become a candidate for the alternative environment. Becoming a candidate also does not necessarily predict selection, and this may be due to the school's discretionary perception of the student's social and academic position.

The process of separation begins in the placement of the student in after school detention, ISS, or OSS, the repeating of a grade as well as overage, the removal to a discipline alternative program for a certain time frame, or expulsion. The process begins early in the 9th grade for some students and in-between the 10th and 12th grade for others. Although non-discipline alternative schools are supposed to

be attended by student choice through the application and interview process, this study suggests attendance is often by mandatory or discretionary recommendations since separation is not through the accumulation of characteristics from the five factors. Clearly, students were also approached by administrators in the traditional setting, thus leading to the recommending of placement for perceived future academic and/or behavioral needs.

The separation experience of alternative at-risk students is visible and non-visible. This experience includes the separation from friends, the separation from the original graduation plan (that of graduation with their cohort), the separation from participation in the formal activities of the home campus (clubs, sports, etc.), the separation from the classification of regular student to a separate category with the label of at-risk (students must be classified at-risk to attend alternative schools), the separation from student diversity (alternative schools are disproportionately minority), and the separation of opportunity to engage physically and mentally with a plurality of a student body that reflects the make-up of

one’s broader educational community (Athletes, UIL Competitors, Gifted and Talented, Honors, etc.).

The separation also reflects the majority of students having their graduation plan changed to a basic diploma from a recommended level. The fact that there is a change from recommended to basic in student educational graduation plans for at-risk students in the alternative environment clearly suggests low expectations. Because the alternative environment has a lack of both educational and physical resources, this separation then establishes another concept – that of a second class group of students in a second class academic setting. Consequently, the data suggests that the alternative educational environment is a reflection of the substitutions of different forms of deficit thinking as seen in the literature review.

This type of thought is so much a part of the American landscape with the many programs designed to support students in an at-risk situation that at times it is difficult to recognize. Consequently, what are campaigns against the form of deficit thinking sometimes become

substitutions of different forms of deficit thinking (Fuchs, 1995; Pearl, 1997; Scheurich, 1997).

Mexican American students in this study are the dominant group in the alternative school learning environment. They constitute a majority by choice according to the alternative schools' program enrollment criteria that no one is placed. This strongly suggests that the traditional educational system has yet to meet the educational needs of many Mexican American students in an at-risk situation.

Personal Reflections

> There is also no teleology to any archaeology, though there are certainly tendencies based, especially, on the deepest assumptions, rules, etc. For example, if an archaeology is deeply [racist], it will likely be that it will continue in that direction… (Scheurich, 1997, P. 177)

This academic endeavor has allowed me to return to unanswered questions concerning my own education and to place them in some order as to how they could have happened. Although all those educators who crossed my path have long

since gone, I believe they would accept my explanation of events.

Recently, while visiting my oldest sister in California, I was reminded by her of how I did not want to go to school during those first early years in my education. I had heard this from her before, but, for whatever reasons, the information did not register. This time my whole family was present, and I felt a sense of unexplained discomfort when the words flowed from my sister's mouth as if the incidents had just happened yesterday. She provided detailed accounts of what she remembered and the extreme actions I had taken as a child to avoid attending school. Now, as a doctoral candidate, I could not place those memories. But slowly over the days that followed from our visit, I started putting that time in perspective.

The reason I feel I did not want to go to school was because of the spankings I received due to not knowing how to speak English. Although my mother spoke some English, Spanish was the predominant language not only in our house but in the entire *barrio* [neighborhood]. The memory is so decayed that I recall only bits and pieces of that

particular time. My sister mentioned that my aunt at times would carry me to school because I would hold on to the bed in refusal. Yet, somehow I managed to cope with that difficult time.

What follows is a theoretical construct from my perception from my present educational experience as to what might have happened to me as well as to other children from that particular time in the Texas educational system.

The educational concept at that time, like all educational concepts, had good intentions – the more you speak English, the faster you will understand it and improve in your academic performance. Therefore, Spanish should not be spoken in the school by Mexican American children if they wish to learn English.

The intentional unintended harm was the maximum application of an acceptable consequence within the range of the school discipline policy for the persistent Spanish speaker. The policy of choice acceptable to the problem solution was spanking because corporal punishment is still today a policy solution for the discipline of all school children. This practice constituted a set of conditions that

were present for many Mexican American children in schools where “speaking Spanish” emerged as a problem that the institution could address in the extreme with spanking. I should mention here that this condition was not necessarily applied across the whole district or even across any one particular school campus. This is because each educator dealt with the condition of speaking Spanish differently in his or her classroom. Consequently, consciously or unconsciously, with or without intent, educators at the micro-level enforced an intentional policy that unintentionally harmed a specific target group whose condition (the speaking of Spanish) legitimized a problem in the educational environment.

It is the condition of a specific target group that will evoke the intentional application of a policy and unintentionally do more harm. It is also the pressure school administrators feel to resolve issues. In the effort to resolve issues, administrators will want to move quickly, which makes it riskier, and therefore more unlikely, to reflect on, or be wholeheartedly committed to, supporting all students. To confirm my thoughts, I looked for an

example or examples that what happened fifty some years ago could and would reproduce itself in some hybrid manner today. Consequently, in the last district in which I was employed, an example of how this can be played out with the best of intentions in dealing with an issue occurred and is as follows:

An African American mother complained to a school district administrator about the use of the word “nigger” in the book *Bound for Oregon* which her child’s class was reading as part of their social studies unit. The book was published in 1994 and received positive reviews for school-age students. The reviews did not mention the use of the word in the book. The word appears only once and is appropriate to the story. The teacher and principal had agreed that the word would be discussed in class before the class read the book. Although the district has a complaint procedure to follow, the administrator who dealt with the complaint, also an African American, applied the extent of the policy and ordered the teacher to mark through the word “nigger” with a black marker in every book held by the school.

This action opened up an array of issues with ramifications from censorship of educational materials and damaging public property to the continued perpetuation of shame for African American children of another generation. The action reinforced for the African American parent that it is the “word” constructed in another time frame which indeed generates shame (as it was intended to do) rather than the society that constructed the word.

Consequently, levels of institutional indifference and racism are legitimized and perpetuated by educators in decision-making positions who, blindly or unconsciously and without intent to harm, cause more harm. This tends to happen when they enforce a policy without discussion or consideration of the consequences; the behavior is clearly impulsive, without benefit of reflection. Because no one challenges these behaviors, the mind set of these individuals rarely becomes consciously aware at a level to reflect on the actions of a policy and the behavior it reproduces. This enforcement of the policy to mark out the word “nigger” then denies discussion and reinforces that

other educators will not bring the issue into the mainstream of education, at least in that school district.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Recommendations

Alternative education is based on the belief that all children can learn but that not all children are able to learn in all educational environments. Consequently, alternative schools moved away from the focus on student individual factors to school factors and processes that might influence dropout behavior. Changing this focus allowed alternative schools to include in their programs features that influence students in an at-risk situation toward school completion (Raywid, 1999; Young 1992; Katsiyannis & Williams, 1998; Finn & Gau, 1998).

These program features impact in particular four institutional areas considered critical in influencing student dropping out behavior: 1) the student composition - social, 2) the school resources – pupil/teacher ratio, 3) the school structure - size, and 4) the school's policies and practices. The literature reveals that in the early days

before the standard-school reform movement, alternative schools appeared to have had more control over these four areas, in particular the school's policies and practices (Raywid, 1999; Rumberger & Rodriguez, 2002).

With the inception of No Child Left Behind, alternative schools' approach and delivery of services will be altered in the four program areas. There is a possibility that because of this reform the alternative schools' present structure and image may have an opportunity for change. No Child Left Behind appears to support school districts in narrowing the gap between traditional and alternative education for at-risk students and getting rid of the label at-risk. Therefore the logical steps taken by the educational school system should be towards an androgynous reflection of the traditional regular school and the alternative school learning environment.

Student Composition

Alternative programs need to be accessible to all students – Honors, Gifted and Talented, etc. True alternative programs should be a "choice" for all students. Considering that student characteristics have an impact not

only on school performance but on psychological well being, it becomes critical to not segregate based on any form of academic or social composition (Sagor, 1999; Roderick, 1993; Dunbar, 2001; Redding & Shalf, 2001).

School Resources

Appropriate resources impact student performance. The teacher-student ratio is affected by the resources a school is able to garnish. A ratio of ten to one is critical when it comes to alternative instruction, especially in alternative “self-paced” programs, and a fifteen to one ratio works best when following traditional grade level instructions in the alternative environment (Young, 1992; Hanushek, 1998; Secada, 1999).

With the inclusion of all students, resources should then include a broad range of teacher composition which is also an educational resource. Not limiting specific teachers as well as the free movement of teachers between the traditional and the alternative setting is an integral part of a quality education for all students. Teachers who teach high level courses (i.e., Advanced Placement courses, Honors, Gifted and Talented) should be accessible to all

students, setting a level field of high standards for all students (Raywid, 1994; Katsiyannis & Williams, 1998; Scribner & Paredes-Scribner, 2001).

School Structure

Critical at the secondary level is not only the size of the classes but the size of the school as well for safety. The student population should be balanced according to the professional staffing. By doing so, the facilitation of teacher/student interaction is further influenced. Along this same line of structure size, the physical building should not be the traditional “hand-me-down” that has historically housed many alternative programs. Consequently, the student’s engagement with the educational condition, structure, and experience will impact the direction of dropping out behavior (Raywid, 1999; Furlong & Gale, 2002; Saunders & Saunders, 2002).

School Policies and Practices

Academic practices and discipline policies influence dropping out behavior directly and indirectly. Academic “choice” needs to be a mainstream alternative to instruction as well as assessment in alternative programs; traditional

academics have not been effective with many at-risk students. Discipline policies like zero tolerance should not be used to blanket all school codes of student conduct rules. Rigid and punitive discipline policies that encourage conformity rather than flexibility are critical to the drop out behavior of students of Mexican heritage (Raywid, 2001; Dupper & Bosch, 1996; Dunbar, 2001; Skiba & Peterson, 1999; Valencia, 1999; Valencia, Villarreal & Salinas, 2002).

Conclusions

Although the Federal legislation that created No Child Left Behind will impact and possibly lead to the dismantling of the Texas Alternative Accountability system (since states cannot have two separate accountability systems), the Texas alternative school structure will continue to serve at-risk students. It existed before accountability, and, more than likely, districts will find creative ways to continue to separate at-risk students to these alternative learning environments.

It is also possible that this dismantling could be the spring board for the next step of growth in the design of

alternative environments. It could provide encouragement to school districts to create an androgynous innovative educational system between the two present school systems for all students which will include students in an at-risk situation in both environments.

Clearly alternative schools cannot continue in the manner in which they have been serving at-risk students. The separation to a different environment brings separate academic services as well as expectations. Therefore, the composition of students in alternative environments needs to be a reflection of the community. The process of separation, with the best of intentions, brings a certain degree of alienation as well as disassociation, and this lack of connection may contribute to dropping out behavior.

History has given us a Supreme Court decision that separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Therefore, if alternative environments are to exist, resources should be a combination from both the alternative and traditional setting. What is most unjust at the present time is that parents of at-risk students as tax payers continue to pay taxes for the regular educational services,

but their children receive second class academic expectations and services. Subsequently, what is happening with at-risk students, especially with a high number of Mexican Americans through this separation to alternative environments, is the separate constructed belief of an equal education.

Alternative schools, as an integral part of the discipline component of the educational design system to maintain order in the regular school, could justify their existence if only behavior students were placed there. The fact that both academic and behavior students are represented in “choice” alternative schools poses the question of intention.

Educational desegregation for many at-risk students, especially Mexican American students, has not come true. True educational desegregation can only come from inside the system. Outside forces (judicial decisions) only seem to challenge its creativity; gifted and talented, honors, etc., are all hybrid segregation shoots the years have witnessed since Brown vs. the Board of Education.

Consequently, the participants' experience of their alternative education represents a formal state-constructed design specifically for students subjectively given the label of at-risk. This design has established an educational environment separate from the regular school which was specifically for at-risk students, many of whom are Mexican American, which achieved its own separate accountability system. Although some of these alternative programs are housed within the regular school, the separation of students plays a major role. This state-approved separation design is clearly an unethical but legal hybrid form of a past separate but equal educational belief, and the level of segregation is further intensified when the alternative school is physically separated from the traditional regular school environment.

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VITA

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